

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

# **Schlock!**

## **WEBZINE**

VOL. 12, ISSUE 19  
28TH JANUARY 2018

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LUDFORD—  
*ONLY VAGUELY  
HUMAN...*

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Gavin Chappell

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Gould*

## SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 12, Issue 19  
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Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels, and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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

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## EDITORIAL

This week a journalist vows to expose the city's new policy for containing homelessness, while a headcase meets his match with a being from mythology. An art historian encounters subterranean art lovers. Christians clash with Worldlings in Devon. And John C Adams reviews a new Swords against Cthulhu novel that combines Roman history with Lovecraftian horror.

We begin a new Godan story from Garret Schuelke. The Astronaut crosses the Untravelled Deep to another world. And meanwhile it's Friday night in Surrey, which can only mean one thing—Martian invasion!

—Gavin Chappell

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[Lovecraftiana Halloween 2018](#)



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REBELLION by Dave Ludford

Being never likely to turn down a free drink, and always willing to live up to the stereotype of the hard-drinking hack, Ray Robinson sat at a corner table of the Crown and Sceptre awaiting the return of his friend Kelvin Trent with their drinks. He could hear Trent's raucous laughter from the packed bar; he was no doubt sharing a few yarns with several of his innumerable buddies. Eventually Trent broke through the crowd and placed two pints of Badger's Tail on their table. Robinson picked up his glass immediately and held it up to the harsh glare of the overhead strip light, savouring the clear, pale-yellow liquid. His first mouthful followed seconds later.

"A fine choice, Trent," Robinson said, smacking his lips. "I'm tasting citrus fruit."

"Thought you'd like it," Trent replied. "Being a true connoisseur. To be honest, they all taste the same to me."

"Philistine," Robinson retorted, grinning widely. Trent cackled in response, nodding his head in agreement with the joke-insult.

"So, Trent, having known you as long as I have, I would guess that there was an ulterior motive to this drink invite. You got something for me? I've been out of circulation for a few months covering the elections, but something interesting must have happened in that time, right?"

Trent remained silent for a short while, apparently deep in concentration. He took small sips of his beer, staring intently at his glass as he placed it back down on the table. Robinson, an experienced journalist, rode the silence with practised calm. Eventually, his friend and chief source of local information spoke, his voice just above a murmur, still staring at his glass.

"I know you are aware of this city's policy towards the poor and homeless, Ray."

"Sure I do. Shunt them away into any one of our numerous derelict and dilapidated old shitholes and forget about them. Don't upset the nice people—especially those good souls with money, power and influence. It's been the same for years, I wrote an article about it which resulted in a friendly but ominous warning from the Mayor's office that effectively put the gag on me. I called it the 'Out of sight, out of mind' approach in the piece. We were forced to print a grovelling retraction in the next evening's edition."

"I read that article. One hundred percent accurate. It was a good piece, Ray."

"Thanks buddy. I strive for the truth, which is a near-impossible creature to hunt down in this god-forsaken place. Sure I've bent and broken the rules when I've felt the need to, but despite everything I have my journalistic pride and reputation to think of. Hope that doesn't sound too nauseous by the way."

By way of a reply, Trent shook his head and swallowed the last of his beer.

"Guess I haven't lost those principles that made me want to do this job in the first place," Robinson continued. "I can be a cynical old bastard of course, but the quest for truth has

guided me every day for the last ten years. Colleagues call me naïve and idealistic. I call it being a good journalist.”

Trent looked into Robinson’s eyes at that moment, noting the zeal for truth and justice that burned like fire. He continued speaking in a low voice.

“Thing is, Ray, even a filthy dump like this city eventually runs out of ‘shitholes’ as you so eloquently term them. So the authority has been driven to desperate measures. To cut a long story short, dozens of our poorest and most vulnerable people have been herded into the old Batspit sewer, thence to be left to their own devices.”

Robinson’s jaw visibly dropped; for a man who made his living from words he found it difficult to absorb this information and formulate a verbal response. Eventually, those words came, spilling out in a voice full of outrage and disbelief.

“Fuck, Trent, what are you telling me here? That part of our sewage system has been shut down and sealed off for years, ever since the authority found out that Maddox Chemicals had been dumping all sorts of toxic shit down there for decades. Hell, the Liberal administration at the time even forced Maddox out of town, too. How...why...Jesus, Trent, this is fucking unbelievable. I can’t believe...”

“Well, you’d better believe it, Ray, because it has happened. Policy reversal by the current powers-that-be. It’s fact. That section of sewer was opened up a month ago. Armed guards are on sentry duty 24-7, making sure those poor bastards can’t get out. Fuck knows how they’re surviving down there, or indeed if they are. Nobody even knows precisely how many they number.”

Robinson took out his mobile from his jacket pocket and scrolled down his contact list until he came to Jane Patterson, editor of the Evening Express, the biggest local newspaper and the one he did the most freelance work for. He jabbed the number, but it went straight to voicemail.

“Jane, hi, it’s Ray. Call me, soon as. Please.”

He replaced the phone and stood up, picking up both beer glasses and reaching into his jacket once more, this time for his wallet.

“We need refills, Trent. And something a bit stronger to go with them. This is fucking sensational, I’m gonna blow this city’s authorities and the mayor’s office to atoms. Sweet Jesus, how could they be so cruel, so callous? I didn’t think those bastards could sink any lower. This is pure evil.”

Trent smiled sadly in response but remained silent. There was one piece of information he’d kept back from Robinson which he’d tell his friend but only once they’d both had a couple more drinks at least.

Normally she would never dream of walking her dog in this rundown neighbourhood with its crumbling high-rise tower blocks and filthy, litter-strewn streets. But she was feeling curious,

wanted to see it for herself, and to personally thank the guards for their vigilance and the fine work they were doing keeping the poor and homeless away from decent people. She saw it as her civic duty. She shivered in the chill of a late autumn evening despite the leopard skin coat she wore, expensive heels clacking on the cracked and uneven pavement slabs, her beloved poodle Trixie sniffing away into every dark and forbidding corner. This was her first visit to the Batshit area of the city; and her last, she hoped.

The poodle had stopped to sniff at a turd a few feet ahead, and she pulled the leash hard to yank the dog away. She nearly vomited, could feel the acid bile begin to rise in her guts, but after a few minutes the unpleasant sensation subsided, and she was able to resume walking.

“Naughty Trixie,” she said. “Keep away from that disgusting filth.”

The dog had other ideas however; it seemed intoxicated on the cocktail of strange and unfamiliar odours it was encountering, and she struggled to keep control of the animal. Shortly they turned a corner into Batshit Street, and she knew from scrutinizing a map of the city that the entrance manhole to the old sewer lay at the end of this road. Suddenly her dog halted, froze, and refused point-blank to move any further. It began to whimper like it did when it wanted feeding, a loud racket that drove her crazy. It took all of her limited strength to pull the leash and drag the dog behind her. As if realizing that its mistress was intent on progressing along this route the dog fell into reluctant step behind her.

She had the feeling that something wasn’t quite right when just a couple of hundred yards from the sewer entrance. It was difficult to make out what lay ahead of her in the growing gloom of the evening, not helped by the fact that all of the street lights had been smashed, the glass glistening like millions of small diamonds on the pavement. But surely she should be able to make out the figures of the guards standing sentry over the manhole? The only thing she could make out was what looked like two large bundles of rags dumped on the ground. At this point the dog decided it was going absolutely no further and pulled on the lead with such force that she lost her grip; the terrified animal skittered at great speed back in the direction from which they’d come.

“Oh, honey wait! No! Come back!” she shouted at the retreating dog, but totally in vain. She was torn between going after it and completing her mission to speak to the guards at the sewer entrance. Perhaps they’d gone off for a break...but what were those rags? In her indecision she turned back towards the sewer, to be confronted by a creature just a couple of feet away that looked only vaguely human. It was over six feet tall and its clothes hung in tatters, as if it had been mauled by a ferocious beast. She had time to register the fact that most of the left side of its face was completely missing, and the remaining huge bloodshot eye regarded her with what looked like curiosity, its grotesque head slightly tilted. A stream of drool poured from its ruined mouth, lips completely missing. The creature began to lumber towards her. She was too terrified to move, being rooted to the spot as her dog had been just minutes earlier. She couldn’t even scream, just shook her head in total disbelief. The creature was upon her within seconds, first gripping her around the throat with claw-like fingers and exerting a terrible pressure. Before she passed out completely she took in that mouth once more, which was now painfully twisted into a mangled parody of a smile.

The creature tore off her head, a swift movement accompanied by the cracking of bones and the tearing snap of muscles and tendons. It held this against its chest while the rest of the body slumped to the ground, blood gushing from the gaping neck wound that sluiced away



into the filthy gutter. Then it turned around towards the sewer where several more creatures were emerging from the open manhole. It held the head aloft like a prize, emitting a high-pitched roar that brought corresponding roars of approval from the others, who had begun to sort through the piles of rags that contained the remains of the sentry guards. They tore off heads and limbs then began to gorge ravenously on the flesh. The Batshit rebellion had begun.

“Thing is, Ray, we’ve been gagged. Again. So has the Tribune. We can’t run with this. There is no such thing as a free press in this city any more. In fact I doubt there is a free press in this whole goddamn country since the Populist Nationals swept back into power. Those nasty bastards just got a whole lot more fucking nasty.”

Robinson was seated across the desk from Jane Patterson, editor of the Evening Express, the day following his meeting with Trent. Patterson had had an inkling as to what Robinson wanted to talk to her about; after the elections the Batshit situation was the city’s main topic of discussion and debate. But she felt powerless, her hands tied. The newspaper had been threatened with forced closure by the local authority if it so much as hinted at what was going on at the sewer. Robinson let out a long sigh of exasperation, stood up, and walked across to the large window that gave a panoramic view of the authority’s buildings.

“I know how you feel, Ray. Fuck, I feel the same way too. So does everyone at the paper. You’re not the only journalist in town with a perfectly preserved set of ethics and morals.”

Robinson turned, hands thrust deep into his trouser pockets.

“I won’t keep quiet about this, Jane. No way. This is just too big. Those bastards have to be held to account for this. They are herding poor and homeless people into a sewer to live amongst who knows what amount of toxic shit.”

“I’m aware of what’s going on, Ray...”

“And besides, there’s a personal element here, a nice little bombshell that Trent dropped on me last night when I was pissed but not quite pissed enough to understand what he was saying.”

“Go on.”

Robinson resumed his seat and looked Patterson straight in the eye, so intensely that she at once felt uncomfortable. Robinson swallowed hard before continuing.

“Trent has heard a rumour that Claire is down there.”

“Oh fuck, Ray, no—please God, no...”

Patterson was fully aware of Robinson’s relationship with Claire Connolly, an eighteen-year-old former heroin addict whom Robinson had helped kick the poison when she was just sixteen. He’d come across her while researching a piece on local drug dealers and their victims that had earned him three broken ribs and a spell in hospital. Connolly had become the daughter that Robinson had never had. He was fiercely protective towards her and had encouraged her to enrol at art school, where she was currently excelling.

“Apparently she was sleeping over at her girlfriend’s bedsit when there was a round-up, in true Gestapo style, of the poor and generally undesirable in the Batshit neighbourhood. She doesn’t have a mobile, so I can’t contact her that way. I went round to her bedsit earlier this morning and she’s not there. Neighbours say she hasn’t been about for a few days.”

Patterson began tapping her fingernails on the polished wood of the desk, then abruptly ceased when she saw the irritated-to-fuck expression on Robinson’s face.

“Ray, I really hope she’s not down there, but whether she is or not it doesn’t change a thing. I just simply cannot commission any sort of article on the Batshit Project. It’s not going to happen. Sorry.”

Robinson shrugged his shoulders and stood to leave, understanding his editor’s position and powerlessness to act. As he reached the door he turned back.

“Whether she is or not, Jane,” he said, echoing his editor’s words, “I have to know. For certain. I can’t carry on not knowing. I love that crazy kid, and I’m going to find her.”

“How will you do that Ray?”

“By going to the place where she’s rumoured to be. I’m going down the Batshit sewer.”

“Sir, I need hardly remind you that we have two missing officers. This pitches the whole situation to critical level. Something is going on in the Batshit neighbourhood, or more specifically in the area around the sewer. Then there are the missing persons, the latest being Mrs Shirley McCain, who disappeared while walking her dog. She’s from the highly respectable Mount Hill estate, so fuck even knows what she was doing in Batshit, which is right across the other side of the city...”

“I’m well aware of this city’s geography, Chief Superintendent Brannon, and I’m also aware of the missing officers. I take it you’ve put a couple more men on guard duty?”

Brannon wilted under the Police Commissioner’s withering gaze.

“Yes, sir, I have...but the men are spooked, they can sense bad shit emanating from that God-forsaken place...”

The Commissioner rose and walked from his desk across thick pile carpet towards a coffee machine in the corner. He poured two cups, retraced his steps and placed one in front of his subordinate.

“I guess so, Brannon. Thing is, we both know that this whole Batshit Project is a crock of shit that was bound to backfire sooner or later. It’s immoral and inhumane, and I could get arrested for even thinking those words. But it’s authority policy and therefore our job to police it. We have no choice. We’ll carry on searching for our men of course, and those other missing people. I can draft in extra search teams from other divisions if needs be. Our budget is stretched to fuck but in the circumstances...”

The Commissioner's voice tailed off and he waved his hand in apparent dismissal. Brannon took the cue and left his boss's office, his coffee untouched.

He returned to his own office, closed the door behind him and sat behind his desk that was cluttered with paperwork. There was something nagging away at the back of his mind. Had someone—or several people—somehow escaped from the sewer, killed his officers and disposed of their bodies? Surely not—a preliminary examination of the scene had shown that the manhole cover had still been firmly secured in place. And what the hell had happened to those others? Three reported missing now. His guts began to lurch, and he felt nauseous. He was sure that some bad shit was indeed going down in Batspit. And this didn't bode well for the Mayor's upcoming visit to that neighbourhood.

Driven by their insatiable desire for fresh meat the nightly excursions of the Batspit sewer creatures into the surrounding streets became bolder and more daring; they had to be, as prey was proving to be in short supply. Hardly anyone walked the Batspit streets as the afternoon gloom turned to full-on darkness, the residents being in constant fear of the authority's round-ups. At least indoors they had the chance of successful concealment; outdoors they stood no chance whatsoever. One such resident, however, was prepared by absolute necessity to run the risk. Derek Bridge owed money, and he owed it to one of Batspit's biggest and most feared drug dealers. Cain Harris had given him one last chance, and tonight was the deadline. Bridge clutched the envelope containing £300 inside his overcoat pocket and set out from his grimy terraced house towards the Royal Oak pub whistling nervously, eyes darting into every nook and cranny of the street.

He was half way to his destination when he heard what sounded like a low groaning noise coming from a filthy alleyway to his right. He stopped in his tracks, fear charging his whole body like a sudden rush of electricity. The groaning continued, and Bridge felt as if his legs were made of cement. He narrowed his eyes and squinted into the alleyway but could see nothing. Suddenly, a figure of the utmost hideousness emerged; what looked to be a woman, or what had once been a woman. Both eyes were missing, the dark sockets where they had once been sprouted arteries that hung like worms. Most of her hair had been burned away leaving her skull exposed, the skin of which hung in flaps in several places. It was as if she had been exposed to radiation. She wore very little in the way of clothing; her top half was completely naked and both breasts had been burned off. For a split-second Bridge thought the creature before him was a hideous side-effect of his beloved recreational drugs of choice, some manifestation of his chemically damaged brain. But the woman-thing grabbed hold of his arm, and the touch of her confirmed to Bridge that this was no hallucination. He began to piss himself, soaking himself within seconds. He couldn't scream, couldn't cry out, could utter no sound whatsoever. The last thing that Bridge was aware of before he passed out was the excruciating pain as the creature began to tear at the flesh of his face.

The creature tore away at Bridge, scooping whole handfuls of his flesh into its mouth, all the while gurgling away like a contented baby. Soon it was joined by several other hideous, once-human beasts, who wasted no time whatsoever in joining in the feast. For some it was their first taste of human meat in days.

Robinson entered Batspit Street in the late afternoon of the following day; just four o'clock and it was already dark, seeming like the middle of the night. He'd come as prepared as he could be for his journey into the sewer (his 'journey into the unknown' as he nervously termed it himself.) The canvas shoulder bag he carried contained two powerful torches, spare batteries, a claw hammer to prise up the manhole cover, and several face masks of the sort used by surgeons. Who knew what toxic shit was down there; many times he'd tried to talk himself out of this venture, knowing it could be the last thing he ever did on this planet. But his gut instinct told him that Claire Connolly was down there; that she needed his help, and he wasn't prepared to ignore that feeling. He would never be able to live with himself if anything happened to her and he'd done nothing about it.

Fifty feet from the manhole cover he reached into his bag and pulled out one of the torches, aiming its beam at the sewer's entrance. He was surprised to see that the cover had been removed; it lay on the ground just a metre or so away. How the hell...surely it had been sealed in place? And where were the guards? He'd come fully prepared to bribe those guards with a significant sum of money each. Money talked, especially in this city. Money got you access to anywhere you wanted to go. Well it looked as if his money was safe now. Trent had just that day told him of a rumour that two police guards had mysteriously vanished, along with a few others in the vicinity. So perhaps the replacement guards had gone the same way, or perhaps they just hadn't been replaced. Either way, his access would be unhindered.

He stood over the opening, peering down. He shone his torch's beam down the shaft; a set of metal ladders led down into the cavernous depths below. Once more he banished any second thoughts from his mind, turned around, and placed his right foot gingerly on the top rung, then began his descent.

It took just a few minutes to reach the bottom rung, then a short hop saw him on the floor of the sewer. The first thing he noticed was the acrid, chemical smell; it was overpowering, seemed to tear at his lungs. He began a coughing fit that lasted several minutes. The poor souls forced to live down here—if it could be described as living—were breathing in this foul, toxic brew? He reached into his bag and pulled out one of the masks, tied it around his mouth and nose once the coughing had subsided. It afforded only minimal relief from the vile odour. Surely whoever was down here couldn't inhale this and remain alive? Including Claire...

He played the torch beam around the walls; black barrels stood singly or stacked up to three high in several places. Barrels with skull and crossbones labels, hazardous chemical warning labels. Many didn't even have stoppers screwed on; toxic vapour swirled from them, snaking upwards to the ceiling and pouring further down along the shaft of the sewer. So the authority hadn't even bothered to clear out the Maddox shit before forcing people down here, as he'd long suspected. Anger welled up inside him, he could feel his blood pressure rising. His temples began to pound a thumping rhythm in his ears. The anger forced him onwards, he was now more than ever determined to find Claire and get her out of this hell hole. He began walking, shining his torch to right and left, up and down. The floor was a trickling stream of vile fluid, the constitution of which he didn't care to think about. He stepped over and around it wherever possible; luckily he'd thought to wear a pair of tough boots. From somewhere came a steady drip, drip sound like a water torture. He tried not to think about it, forced himself to think of Claire as he strode onward into eternal night, towards the very devil for all he knew.

Twenty minutes later he stopped abruptly, the periphery of his senses alerted by what sounded like a low moaning noise coming from just a short way ahead. He shone his beam straight forward but could see nothing other than more of the same interminable nothingness he'd already passed through. More barrels lined this section, oozing their poisonous vapour into the chamber. It was as he switched his beam to scan along the wall to his left that he noticed an alcove thirty or so metres away. Sure enough, the moaning noise seemed to emanate from there. He walked towards it, fear churning away in his guts. It was a human sound to be sure, so had he at last come across one of the sewer's residents? He dreaded the potential encounter with whatever was making that pitiful, god-awful noise.

Upon reaching the alcove he stopped once more and played his beam around the small space. Shock at seeing what appeared to be a human figure slumped in a corner made him stumble backwards. He regained his footing but made no further attempt at forward movement. The figure began to stand awkwardly and then took ungainly, shambling steps towards him. He couldn't make out a face because the head was bowed. With a shaking hand he shone the torch directly at the advancing figure. Surprised by the sudden, strong burst of light, the figure raised its head. And Ray Robinson collapsed in shock and disbelief, struggling more than ever since he'd been down there to breathe properly as he sank to his knees. For confronting him was a creature with a hideous distortion of Claire Connolly's face. Her shoulder-length, raven-black hair was intact, but it framed severely burned skin with several blisters which seeped pus and blood. One eye was missing, and her mouth was upturned at one corner in a painful-looking sneer. She began to speak, her voice a horrible rasping croak.

"Ray! You've come for me. I knew you would. I knew you wouldn't let me down, Ray. Don't be scared of me, although I guess I've changed a bit since you last saw me, huh? I'm afraid I've lost some of my looks."

This prompted a cackling laughter which ended in the creature spitting out a copious amount of saliva mixed with mucus. She began to shuffle forward once more, holding out both arms towards the prostrate journalist, who was whimpering through his mask like a frightened child.

"I'm becoming one of the undead, Ray," the creature continued. "There are hundreds of us down here. It's the chemicals, they're transforming us into beings who will be immortal, who will rise again and take back what is rightfully ours. Join us, Ray. Become one of us. I'll help you."

The creature fell upon Robinson, who emitted an ear-piercing scream as his mask was ripped off; a scream that was stifled as the thing that had once been a beautiful young art student called Claire Connolly delivered a long, lingering kiss full on his lips.

Three days later, the Evening Express reported on the Mayor's visit to the Batshit sewer to personally oversee the final transferral and incarceration of what remained of the city's poor, vulnerable and homeless into its toxic depths. Jane Patterson was personally on hand to witness the carnage that ensued as the Mayor and senior members of the local authority—including the police commissioner—were attacked by a horde of human-like creatures who emerged from the sewer's hellish depths a few minutes before the legion of wretched condemned were due to be familiarised with and permanently sealed into their new home.

Order had been restored when police opened fire on the creatures using automatic weapons and grenades tossed into the sewer. Dozens of innocent bystanders who had come to witness the event were killed in the crossfire as they fled in fear and panic. All of the creatures were slaughtered; their mangled corpses littered the streets for days until the remaining members of the authority authorised a massive clean-up operation.

The Mayor himself had been torn to pieces by one of the creatures whom Patterson was shocked to see bore a hideous resemblance to her friend and sometime freelance employee, Ray Robinson. The trauma of this recognition would remain with her for the rest of her life. Robinson had been the first creature to emerge from the sewer, leading a rebellion of the undead who had come to reclaim their city.

THE END

[Available from Rogue Planet Press](#)

WINTER 2017-18

# Schlock!

## Quarterly

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

**PRETTY PENNY**  
by Kate Lowe

**RED DEMON  
VERSUS THE  
WORM PEOPLE**

BY NEAL PRIVETT

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

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## HEADCASE by Gregory Owen

Throughout my time in this world, many adults and, as I've grown older, my *peers*—if you could call them that—have dubbed me a great many titles: *Crazy*. *Psycho*. *Nutjob*. My favourite, however, is and has always been *Headcase*. For a short time, it never quite occurred to me as to what they meant by such a childish title, but now, in my early adult years—in my prime as a virile, perfect demonstration of the masculine persuasion—I find the term to be undeniably offensive. I'm a *headcase*? Am I crazy? Insane? A psychotic? My childhood psychiatrist never told me so. Mother and Father never told me so. They would be the first to know, would they not? And they weren't so afraid of me to tell me. Yes, I hide what I do behind a veil of anonymity like most true headcases, but I'm not Manson. I'm not Gacy or Bundy or Rader. They were *actual* headcases. Even these people in the bar prattling on about the monster that's attacking people at night are more akin to headcases that I ever could hope to be. I know who I am, what I do, what I like, what I love—is someone in control of one's actions, motivations, and desires truly *crazy*? I don't think so.

I am in *complete* control. Even now, looking at this enchanting specimen across from me, I am in complete control. She can see that I am as she orders another drink.

It took practice to be this way, of course. All things important in life do. My first true love, Lorna, was a brand-new experience for me. So new and fresh; exciting, oh so exciting. She had a sense of such innocence about her, just barely eighteen at the time, but I knew there was something in her. Beneath her skin, something coursing through her very organs. Even the bones and sinew. Something I wanted to know, though I wasn't sure exactly what it could be. Something I wanted to see. I needed to see.

I was more patient then, taking my time and trying to be as meticulous as possible about my every move. Others already found me to be a headcase without any proof, so I couldn't provide them with any more ammunition. That would be foolish! There was even some debate about whether I should act or not, like a game of tug of war between right and wrong that remained a stalemate, but I realized that in the end, one side was simply a small case of fear. I just subdued it, and the rope gave way. Despite all of my slower methods and all of my care, I was still not in control. Nowhere near where I needed to be, at least.

This very fact was proven the evening that Lorna and I decided to consummate our relationship. I recall how it began, but it was only when I saw that I was coated in syrupy crimson from our session that I realized that I had lost all control of myself. I had only brief glimpses in my head of what occurred during the act, like flashes from an old camera, exploding in bright bursts in the synapses in my brain. I was able to piece together what happened. The result was obviously what I wanted, though sloppy and consumed with animalistic savagery, but I never was able to fully enjoy the proceedings. All that time and effort, and no true gratification. No payoff. I ascertained that perhaps I was too zealous, and much too excited. I was just a boy. So carefree, like all boys.

Though I briefly mourned Lorna, it taught me something. I learned then that I was not meant to settle at all. I am not the settling kind, I'd tell myself. I'm more of a lone wanderer—a nomad—moving from place to place, job to job, and especially, relationship to relationship. Hell, I don't even have relationships, to be frank. They're so mundane, so boring. Is it more one-night stand to the next? I think so. To meet someone new...it's *thrilling*, and it's euphoria that never grows stale. But after Lorna, I developed that self-control. I would have



to stifle my curiosity and my virile enthusiasm. I would be able to savour the next. No one would ever be able to call me a *headcase* again.

I was in control when I met Janet. We crossed paths in her local grocery store. Not mine, I know, but truthfully, I try to venture away from my usual places for my own reasons. She asked me if I would grab an elusive can of green peas coated in natural sea salt from the back of the highest shelf, and I did so with a smile. She smiled back, and, as they say, that was that. I was so pleased with myself that my heartbeat never increased in frequency, and I proved then that I was a master of myself. I held those reins so tightly, and I was perfect. God-like, even.

Janet accepted my invitation back to my place—nothing especially grandiose or unique as far as uptown apartments go—and she was so eager to know me. Such a romantic she was, this petite little waif, and it was sickeningly sweet. She believed in love at first sight, so she said. I didn't before. Not until right now, of course—this one I'm admiring right now as I reminisce enjoys her Vodka straight up. Janet, however, didn't enjoy Vodka or any other alcohol, really. Claimed it gave her a headache. It was no matter. I had no difficulty into getting her to do as I wished, manipulating her beliefs about love into moving her into my bedroom, my sanctuary, and moving onto the next phase.

When I peeled away her flesh, I never lost control.

Janet had struggled at first—I know this because I didn't allow myself to enter that same darkness in which I ventured during my session with Lorna. Janet was my first true expression of my wonderfully delicious control of my impulses. The desire to rush, the desire to only consume to satiate and not to savour, was no longer present. I was so proud of myself that when I ate her heart, I felt none of the nervousness that accompanied the aftermath of my consummation with Lorna. Oh God, how fearful I had been that first time of what might happen if I should be caught. But I've only improved with the passage of time. As my skills at self-control have increased, so have my skills with disposal. The fear, the uneasiness, the lack of control—all gone. Exultance takes the place of them all.

Soon after, I was no longer satisfied and ready for the next. I would perfect my practiced abilities, improving upon the progress I had already made with Lorna and Janet under my belt. Heh, "headcase?" I think not!

I was in control upon meeting Shirley. With her, it was in line at a movie theatre that I barely frequented. I didn't even plan to see a movie as I walked along the street, but when my eyes transfixed upon her, I knew then that the next endeavour had presented itself. She was a soft creature, from her combed, golden tresses to the plumpness of her friendly face. I don't recall the film we watched—something poorly written that was churned out hurriedly for the romantic masses (Janet would've loved it)—and I didn't regret not seeing it. I was simply too interested in looking at Shirley. I eyed her up and down, and she noticed, though to my joy, she never thought it strange or invasive that I was looking at her so intently.

I wanted to know what was *beneath*.

After the movie, it was a journey back to my place for a promised dinner of oysters. Pedestrian, I know, being that every run-of-the-mill imbecile claims oysters to be one of the greatest aphrodisiacs crafted by nature, but it does most certainly help to understand prey

when trying to capture it. Any remotely skilled hunter will tell you that. And hunters have excellent self-control.

The bait was a lie, of course. There were no oysters. No aphrodisiacs of any kind for the girl. But after a few Screwdrivers, she needed no coaxing. Shirley was clay, malleable and ready for my hands to do whatever I wished...and they did just that. She was a bit easier than Janet was, to be certain. But the result was still glorious.

As I removed her liver, I never lost control.

I had again exercised my skills with the utmost perfection. No more nerves, no more doubts, I was a machine working at the optimum efficiency. God, how I would have looked to those who would have little understanding of my majesty: simply spectacular. The disposal of Shirley's remains was becoming routine then. I was—I *am*—perfect now.

With all of these women, I was in complete and total control. I'm sure that most would think that I only look at them as objects. Meat. But I am not that uncivilized. Sometime meat does have its purposes, after all. It can satiate even the most primal beings, so it does more than enough for me due to my being much higher on the ladder of civilization, and I have the mental fortitude to savour. I also have enough control to only desire one at a time, and obviously with resting periods in between. Earlier tonight, I decided it was time again to meet yet another.

I arrived at the local club around eleven-thirty. Not too early, not too late—essential time to find someone fitting for a man who knows what he likes, what he wants. A man with such superb control of himself and his lifestyle, the kind of man that is completely irresistible to the ignorant. Ha, that's what they want! What they need! I made sure to dress in clothes meant to astonish with wealth that I didn't have, but no one would ever be the wiser. I made sure to smile, be social. Not a headcase, no, no.

For a short time, I dwelled at the bar, surveying, watching, listening. Over the booming music with the pulse of a titanic heartbeat, I could hear conversations around me. Strange ones, ones that I nearly asked to be repeated to make sure I heard correctly. Unreal stories about unreal things that still baffle me. I recall something about pregnant women at the hospital's maternity ward being attacked at night—something about being bitten and blood drained from them, though not enough to kill them. Only, the victims didn't know it. They would merely wake up, light-headed, to strange dripping wounds the size of nickels with no explanation. And, of course, the security cameras happened to shut down during these occurrences. *Just so happened*, the storyteller said.

Then there was something else about a local teenager found dead on his way home, his bowels torn from him. Claimed he was hollowed out like one of those anatomy busts from the doctor's office. One of the people talking made mention of hearing that those nickel-sized wounds were all over the corpse, too, just like the ones on the pregnant women, though apparently this one looked like it had been placed in an iron maiden or some other medieval torture device from the amount of holes.

As time went on and with no other unique conversations around me, I continued to listen to them. There was talk of it being like some old folk tale: a young man in glasses talked of some books that he'd read once about Eastern beliefs, and that the attacks almost sounded

like a demon of some kind, or perhaps a ghost—something that craved flesh in the night. Some word I couldn't pronounce. Pen-on, something or other. So, what, a vampire? Some kind of Nosferatu? Yes, I'm no obvious college student like the one that mentioned these "Eastern beliefs," but I'm well-versed and educated, too! I felt like I was around a campfire telling scary stories with friends as a boy—if I had really ever done that, of course. Still, it seemed preposterous.

Then there was the term, "serial killer," which caught my attention. Nothing but a crude, deplorable term that some might claim I am. But they don't understand. And how could they? They lack my self-control. Why not call the person or persons responsible for these acts headcases, too?

I grew weary listening to the fear slaloming from their mouths, coagulated with idiotic trembling. I've been afraid before—I have. I was afraid during my time with Lorna, but it passed. The fright connected to this string of attacks will pass, too.

What wasn't passing was my boredom. All of that drivel was dull to me. I needed something exciting, and I found it. *Her*.

I was in control when I found her sitting alone at a small table, drinking Vodka, straight up, from a small, clear glass. She took the straw with her tongue and tightened her ruby lips around it. With my eyes focused on her, I calmly made my way through the dancing, sweating masses to the girl and introduced myself. She seemed shy, looking all about her in something of a bid to determine whether or not I was talking to her.

Yes, I told her, I'm talking to you. She smiled, giggling softly, and that was the start. I introduced myself, and she did the same. Her name is Najihah. Nah-jee-hah. *NAH-JEE-HAH*. I love the way her name sounds, the way the letters flow across my rolling tongue like a stream of exotic honey. From Malaysia, she said. She, herself, is most exotic: dark skin, silky olive hair, and eyes that stare through you, beyond you. I wondered if she could see through me—I wanted to see what was *within* her. I would soon enough. I'm in control.

I've already ordered some drinks for the both of us, and her beauty hasn't faded. God, with how exceptional her skin is, the fruit underneath must be exquisite! And yet, I cannot help but notice a strange odour in her presence. I can't quite place it. Something almost sour, but it seems masked with perfume. Maybe the two Martinis I've had are toying with my perception, though alcohol's never had that effect before for me. It's more than likely coming from the dance floor; all of those bodies seeking to impress the others with their overt gyrations. Pitiful.

It's well after midnight and I've asked her to return to my humble abode with me. It takes some effort on my behalf, something I'm not totally accustomed to, for she seems so dreadfully nervous. I assure her that I'm harmless, that I don't bite, and she chuckles, flashing those ivory white teeth, and she sucks what's left of her drink through the straw. Then the strange odour washes over me again, though it's a bit stronger than before. It's pungent, strong enough to peel paint, and it reminds me of ludicrously powerful vinegar, ushering into my mind memories of colouring Easter eggs with my grandmother in my youth—how the kitchen used to stink with the odour of vinegar! But it can't be coming from her. No, not a beauty such as Najihah.

I won't take no for an answer now. I have to experience what's inside of her, I need to, and though I have control, I am too far along now. Mercifully, it only takes another ten minutes of convincing on my part and we're driving back to my place. Najihah seems anxious, and I hope that it's not due to my adamant need to be with her. She can't know, though—my skills are practiced enough now. My control is god-like. But still...

My charm lures her into my apartment and up to my sanctuary with little effort. My blood pumps through me with increasing ferocity, and I know that it's my excitement, and I try to quell it. I don't know what it is, exactly—Najihah is obviously not my first, as stated before, but there's something about her. I can't explain it. I think it has to do with how she seems unlike all the others. Her beauty is so...alluring. Her nervousness is gone now, vacated like a rat from a sinking ship, and she wants to be with me. It's possible that the alcohol is influencing her judgment. However, I can't deny that it seems as though her enthusiasm is brought on more out of necessity. She seems to be in a hurry.

While I remove my shirt, I question her as to why she's rushing, though my heart pounds in my ears. I have to make it slow down. What's wrong with me? I'm so close to *knowing*—I must have control!

Najihah giggles and says that she needs to get home, and I joke that she's too old to have a curfew considering she's old enough to drink in a club. She knows, and she suddenly becomes fearful again, but it's very subtle. If I weren't staring at her, I would never have noticed. Najihah says that it's important that she leaves soon and says that this can be quick, and I agree. I tell her it will be. I'm lying, of course. I will *savour* this.

She says it will be quick, too—that it has to be. *Does she know? Has someone told her about me?* Hm, no, of course not. No one knows. She'll only realize when it's too late to know any different.

We climb into bed and as I touch the nape of her neck, I begin to notice a different smell from before. It's not the same sour smell that seemed to accompany her in the club, nor is it the perfume that was used to conceal it. It's something sweet, yet all-consuming. My breathing becomes heavier and heavier, as does hers, and my lungs send warmth all through me that spreads to every inch. Something's not right and I float like a puppet with cut strings. Everything turns to water and the world becomes wavy, balloon-like. Najihah pulls away from me. It's like before with Lorna, but—it's different somehow. As blackness consumes me, my last thought repeats over and over: Why did I lose control?! Why—?

*In my dreams, the women I've embraced so closely all appear before me from ether. Lorna, Janet, Shirley: the trio barks words at me that sound like deafening roars.*

Murderer! Monster! Psycho! Headcase!

*They loom above me, becoming giants, and with their size, the volume of their words increases. They attempt to intimidate me. Even in death, they try. They know how I hate those words, having access to my innermost thoughts. Especially headcase. I despise it. Headcase.*

*I know differently. I'm no headcase. Still in control, even in comfortable sleep. Still in control. Still-*

I wake with a start, soaked in icy sweat. At first, I believe the moisture to be the remains of Najihah, but I soon ascertain after seeing that my hands are not stained red that the sheets are dry except for where I had been lying. And then I'm overcome with rage for myself. My control! What had happened to my precious control honed by practice and my own wondrous perfection? Why couldn't I remember—I can't remember anything! Had I truly lost all of my control? No, no, no. Damn it!

But wait! Najihah! What had happened to her?

My eyes dart all around the bedroom and finally rest on her: she is still there, lying next to me. Well, *mostly*. I reach for her shoulder, leaning close to make sure my mind isn't playing one of those tricks on me, and I determine that it really isn't.

Her head is missing.

Only her body remains. Calm, peaceful, as though she were completely intact. No blood, no residue, nothing. Completely untouched, except for her little head. I apparently did not enjoy myself as much as the prior times. I couldn't remember, anyway.

Why can I not remember? I remembered Janet and Shirley, and I was even able to recall parts of my session with Lorna even as long ago as it was, and with my excitement; the memories were brief and fleeting, but I did remember! Now, with such a lovely specimen like Najihah, I can't recall a thing. *Such a loss*. I couldn't know her, know what was beneath. I couldn't truly experience her... all a waste! I'll have to reteach myself all of those talents I had attained through rigorous practice. I will not lose control ever again. Never again!

There is a frozen breeze forcing its way into the bedroom, enveloping my naked form, forcing me to jump up and close the window. I don't remember opening it, but no matter. I don't remember what happened with Najihah! But now, I have other things, much more direly important things, weighing on my mind. Despite my overwhelming disappointment in myself—*how dare I lose control of myself like that?*—I know that I have something to do. The body has to be disposed of.

First, I must get dressed—seeing as how I'm not coated in any blood as with all of the others before, I don't need a shower. Damn it, did I really lose control of anything? As I put on my clothes, I can't help but stare longingly at Najihah's unmoving body, and I feel loathing; not for her, but for me, and for not being able to taste! How could I do that? Such a total loss! I should have been able to enjoy and savour every single moment. And how did I take off her head? More pressing, where in hell was it? I'd have to find the elusive part later.

Now that is a *true* 'headcase!' But I digress...

Next, as I did before with the others, I need to go to my kitchen and get my carving tools—methodically sharpened knives, electric and manual, for quick, precise slicing—and then I'll need the large barrel from my hall closet to place the remains in. Oh, and the concoction of chemicals, the secret ingredient being diluted hydrochloric acid, will be required. I always thoroughly enjoyed chemistry in high school. Yes, I botched my time with Najihah, but I won't fail in erasing what happened. I do have control of this.

Making my way out of the bedroom, I move briskly down the short hallway and I hear a sound.

*Thump! Thump!*

What is that? I move forward and hear it again.

*Thump! Thump!*

I immediately think that it's possibly someone upstairs, but no, the sound is not the same insulated thudding from loud steps or dropped objects on the floor above. No, it sounds as though it's outside the building. It becomes louder as I make my way toward the living room.

*Thump! Thump! Thump!*

I am encroaching upon the source, I just know it! Someone is prowling, lurking outside. A peeping Tom, or a would-be thief? I'll find you, you slippery bastard, and I'll deal with you... I am in control! I am perfection! It's getting louder and louder—something soft, tapping, or perhaps bouncing, off of a hard surface. The noise sounds hollow. The door! It's something hitting the door!

Is it someone knocking at this time of night? Peculiar. I don't have friends or visitors of any kind, aside from those I bring here, and maybe the stray mail carrier at the wrong address. Never at 2 A.M., though... wait. Jesus, could it be the *police*?

Could it be? No, no... I'm so careful. I'm too careful to be caught. I executed everything so far with perfection! This has been the first time I've lost control of myself in months, the only time, and that's surely not enough to warrant a visit from the law. Not so soon. I can't be caught in that way... no, never in *that* way!

Who's there, I ask. No answer. I ask again and only more knocking. I bristle with both apprehension and annoyance, both from the rudeness of the visitor and from his or her hindering upon my disposal of Najihah's body, each compounding the fact that I had lost control of myself. *Stop reminding me of my failure!* I was ready for the night to end so that I could possibly erase what had happened from memory.

I feel every muscle tighten with anticipation, and my grip nearly crushes the doorknob. It's not fear. I yank the door open, and there is nothing in the dark outside. Even peering out into the street from my ground floor room, I see nothing beyond the trees. There are no cars, no people. It's dead out there. I turn to pull the door closed when I notice something move above my head, though it's much too large to be a bird or a bat. Much, much too large, the size of a bowling ball, but moving like it has wings! And below it is what appear to be a cluster of fireflies, only it can't be—I *know it can't!* Whatever they are, they're attached to the dark shape.

My next move, out of reflex, is slamming the door and reaching for the nearby light switch. I never take my eyes away from the shadowy form bobbing along the ceiling, hitting it softly with those thumping sounds I heard earlier—*Thump! Thump!*—and I squint, rubbing my eyes as the illumination nearly blinds me...and I see with horror what has entered my apartment!

In the light, the flying thing reveals itself to me in full, terrible glory. A head, somehow flying through the air, carried on invisible wires, is floating there. And from the stump where it came detached, where a body should be connected, is a marionette of pulsing objects, red and pink, all covered in shiny ooze. They seem to twinkle in the light like...*fireflies*. There is a hissing sound followed by a guttural moan and I focus on the thing's face: the ruby mouth is full of glistening razors, and the eyes are dark and feral, staring through me—*inside of me*—and they were nearly hidden by wild, olive hair. Oh God...

*It's Najihah...*

I swear I'm in control. Even as her mouth opens and her throat produces a veiny proboscis like that of a mosquito, only a foot long and with the circumference of a nickel, I never lose control.

With a monstrous shriek, Najihah's head comes to me as a moth to a sunlamp, beating against me as crooked little knives take pieces of me, bit by bit.

*Thump! Rip...Thump! Rip...*

There is no time to scream. I grab wildly at the thing as it keeps slamming into my abdomen, taking more and more of me, and a slimy sensation envelops my hands. Are this thing's organs coiling around me? Jesus, my rationality has turned into the caterwauls of the damned! Like a hellish octopus, the head's innards wrap around my arms and its fluttering motions push me off balance. I try to struggle and retain my footing, but I tumble back to the floor. It has me, and there's no escape for me! No help to be found! None!

My head slams on the floor when I hit and that same feeling from before I lost consciousness returns—when Najihah's head was still attached—though I know it's likely from blood loss now. That watery feeling that envelops you, coddling, not alerting you to danger even when it's there. And the smell. The vinegar-like odour...it's back, too. I try to flail and fight, but I cannot. I feel pieces of me tearing, warmth running over me. I can't feel my legs now. Cold all over. But warm, too. Liquid warmth, though I'm not sure if it's all blood. There is an inhuman shriek, one of hunger slowly being satiated, but still craving more. But amid the savage eating, I hear something else. Enjoyment. It *savours*...

*Rip...Crunch...Rip...Gurgle...*

Heartbeat's slowing, never increasing or becoming frantic. I'm still in control. God-like. I was never a headcase, and I'm still not a *headcase*. No, no... *this is real*...

Another sensation—a fleshy tube protrudes from its mouth, gliding over my skin, tickling me, like a proboscis from a gargantuan mosquito. It's a straw that then punctures me below my pectoral. I can hear sucking. *Like she's having a drink at the club*. I'd laugh if it weren't so insane!

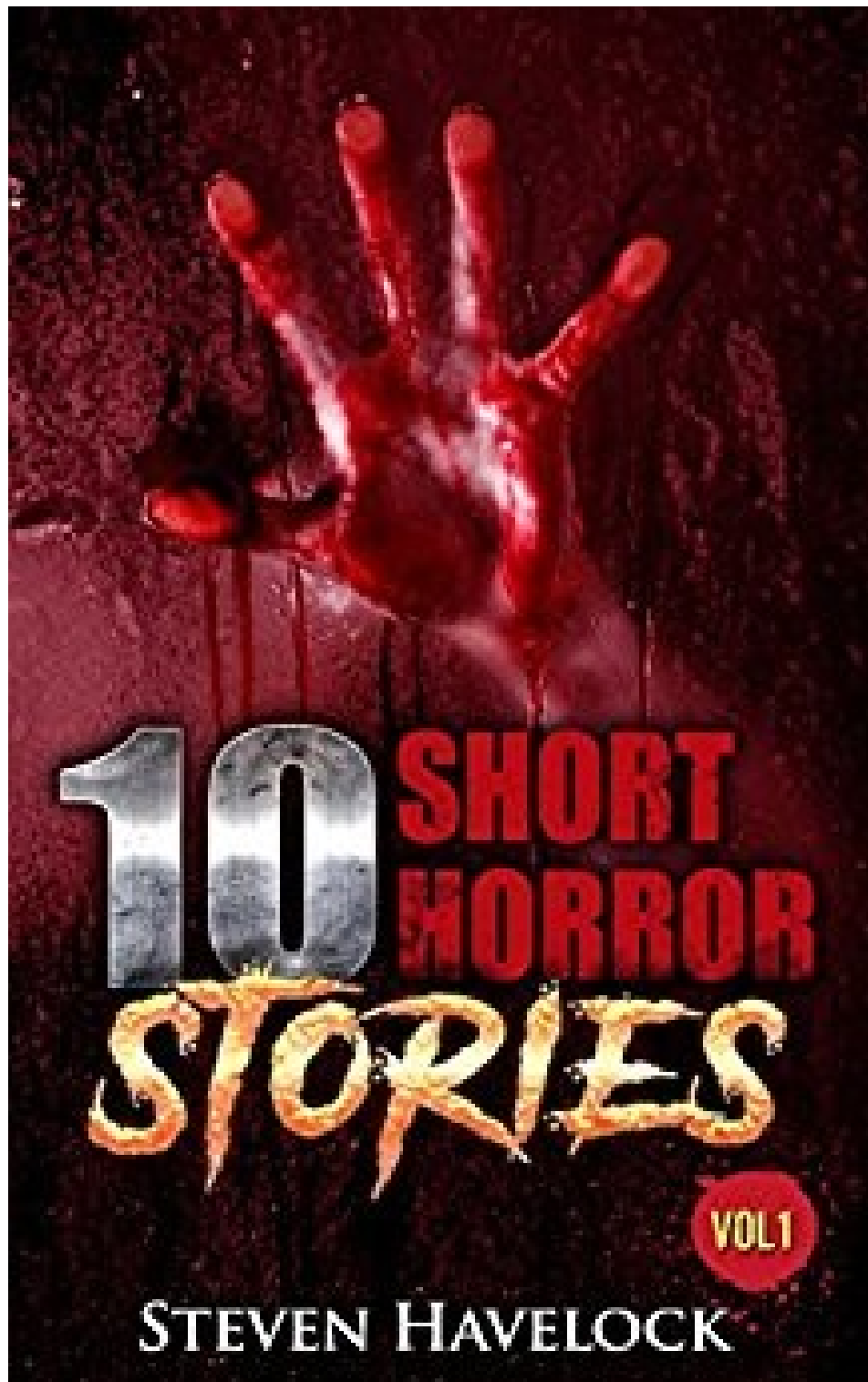
My God! I know now... that folk tale in the club... *it's her*! Najihah is a true monster; society would call me one, but she is the real monster! A serial killer, just *inhuman*. That word I couldn't pronounce—I remember it now: *penanggalan*. A legend come true! And her reign of terror will continue with the end of mine! It's coming sooner and sooner...

My vision begins to fade, and I notice something standing above me in my periphery. No, not something—*someone*. I can barely determine who, but I know. People would call me a headcase now for sure if I could confess what I'm seeing! I don't see a face on this person. There is no face. *No head at all*. The body is waiting for the return of (*oh, Jesus, the pain!*) its most vital part. I'm chuckling now, or perhaps I'm cackling madly—I can't discern, but my heartbeat never increases.

Still. In. *Control*. I had never really lost it! I guess I can die satisfied in that knowledge! Never lost control! *Never! Never!*

THE END





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## THE SEVEN WIVES OF RICHARD COPELAND by Lauren Scharhag

Whenever you tell people you majored in art history, you get responses like, “What do you do with that?” Like there aren’t people with law degrees working at Starbucks. And sure, after I graduated, I waffled a bit. I half-heartedly applied for a few MFA programs, though I’ve never felt particularly called to academia. I did some internships at museums. I was never a gallerista, but I was a gallerista’s assistant, scheduling private viewings and ordering office supplies. I knew how to hustle, though—y’know, play the numbers. Show up to enough openings in the right little black dress and something’s bound to happen.

That’s not to say I don’t care about the art—I do. From a very young age, I knew I wanted to spend my life in palaces of marble and diffuse lighting, to visit crumbling cities where the Michelangelos and the Dalis of the world once walked. I’m the daughter of two artists, you see, and when you’re born into La Vie Boheme, baby, there’s no gettin’ out.

My mother named me Eva after her great friend Eva Hesse, who died the year before I was born. Like my namesake, my mother was primarily a sculptor. The circumstances under which she and my father met varied depending on Dad’s mood, but he stuck to the same story about her bailing when I was eighteen months old. There was no news of her through the network of artists and mutual acquaintances. Apparently, she’d gotten heavily into Buddhism. Dad’s theory is that she immigrated to some Asian country and is presumably applying her postminimalist sensibilities to a Zen garden somewhere. I think my father was more upset about her abandoning art than he was about her abandoning us.

Dad was a painter and sometime drug dealer—mostly weed and the occasional mushrooms, though he worked menial jobs in warehouses or restaurants. We had a place near the art school. Frequently, he let the students pay for their taquitos in trade. The walls of our tiny house were constantly crammed with paintings, drawings, collages, dioramas, you name it. The shelves were cluttered with sculptures and figurines. We lived and breathed it. If we could’ve eaten it, we would’ve been as fat as a pair of Botero figures. (Desperate for grocery money, I started holding porch sales when I was seven.) The house was always filled with artists, with the hippie funk of pot, cloves, coffee, books, turpentine and oils. We spent our weekends at art fairs and festivals, our summers tooling around in a rust-bucket old Buick, doing the whole circuit thing with fold-up display easels and a little cash box. The few girlfriends my father had lived similar rambling existences, selling their bead-and-wire jewellery or hand-thrown earth-tone pottery.

All this hammered home the first lesson: Art is Holy. It is the highest pursuit. Corollary to that, I learned that we do whatever we have to in pursuit of art. And corollary to that, I knew I wanted more than just a tiny rented bungalow, more in my cupboards than packets of Top Ramen.

Of course, I dabbled. For every Christmas and birthday, I was given art supplies. I sketched and played with watercolours and even tried my hand at carving. I wasn’t bad, but I wasn’t good, either. Or at least, not good enough.

I knew art’s power. One of the few pieces of my mother’s that Dad kept was a surprisingly traditional oil painting, with the surprisingly traditional subject of Salome holding St. John the Baptist’s head on a platter. Mom had painted it as an undergrad at NYU. It was a really beautiful piece, but it hung in the hallway right outside my bedroom. As a little girl trying to

go to sleep, I couldn't bear to look at that bloody, severed head, (not knowing the story, I thought the woman in the painting had eaten, or was planning to eat, the man's body), so Dad took it down. But I understood, even back then, that this was what art was meant to do: to invoke a dramatic response in the viewer. I never mastered that skill; I was never able to invoke that power. And I knew I never would.

So at eighteen, I set out, armed with a scholarship to Wash U, intent upon the holy pursuit, willing to do whatever I needed to do to be a good little acolyte.

During my junior year, Dad died of a sudden heart attack. He went just as he would've wanted to go—at his easel. After a few days of being unable to reach him, his friends broke into the house and found him on the floor in a spill of paint. I came home and saw to the arrangements, because there was no one else.

That was a quarter of a century ago. It's a different world now. Artists can sell their own work directly online, or join retail platforms where they can hawk on-demand prints and merchandise. Many cities have regular art events. Fan art has gone mainstream. Very few need a go-between anymore.

But there's still a need for people like me. There are still collectors who want the real deal. There are still people willing to commission work from artists they believe in, or deeply admire, or simply wish to invest in because they expect the art to appreciate in value.

I learned at my father's knee about technique, about the earmarks of the artist's work. I have an eye for authenticity. I have an eye for talent. I won't deal in dreck. The Thomas Kincaides and Margaret Keanes of the world can fuck off. On art, I am uncompromising.

On morality, I am imminently flexible.

When I was twenty-six, I got my first break. I brokered a five-figure deal between an artist and a buyer. Chump change to some, I know, but I used my fee to get a slightly less used car. Within a year, I was making trips to New York to make purchases. After that, it seemed the world opened up: London, Paris, Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Kunming. I've made and maintained many connections over the years, some perfectly reputable and above-board; others, less so.

Five years into my career, I had an apartment in oh-so trendy Soho. Seven years into my career, I hooked up with a guy named Ignacio Baldonado, or Iggy, as he prefers to be called. It might even be the name his parents gave him, but I doubt it. He was only thirty-seven, but had the urbane appeal of a much older man. His clothing was subtle, always immaculately tailored. Ditto his watches, his sunglasses, even his fedoras—an item that has a high potentiality for douchiness, but somehow, he made it work. Not that it mattered how moneyed up he'd become. I knew a hustler when I saw one. Of course I would; we were alike, he and I.

Iggy's appearance and accent are very nondescript—he's got olive skin and dark hair (or at least, it was dark when we met—it's gone fully grey since then). Which is to say, he blends in virtually anywhere in the world. In the US, it's assumed he's Latino. Outside the US, he's

mistaken for Italian, French, Jewish, Roma, Spanish, Middle Eastern. That sort of unobtrusiveness is invaluable in his line of work. Iggy is fluent in five languages and conversational in about half a dozen more. More importantly, he has ways of tracking down rare or 'lost' pieces that collectors will pay top dollar for. He's an absolute bloodhound when it comes to digging up all there is to be dug on our clients, and I feel so lucky to have him, I wouldn't dream of questioning his methods. After a few collaborations and a very brief affair, we formally became business partners.

We are not members of any professional associations. We do not hand out business cards. Our client roster was built entirely by word of mouth. We are discreet and creative.

Mainly, we acquire art for people who wish to remain anonymous. They pay in cash or wire transfers from offshore accounts. Drug lords with Patagonian villas, elderly Mafiosos in Agrigento, Kyodai up-and-comers with spacious Tokyo penthouses to deck out.

And then, we buy for rich Americans and Europeans who don't care to go through more conventional channels—bargain hunters, in other words, who are even less particular than I am about how we round up their coveted Pollacks and Picassos, their Warhols and Basquiats.

Now, I am forty-six, though Iggy tells me I still look thirty. Iggy is fifty and starting to curb his globe-trotting ways, taking longer and longer respites in the south of France, letting his underlings do more and more of the heavy lifting.

So when I was contacted by the office of a Mr. Richard Copeland, a man I'd never heard of, with a request for an in-person meeting, I naturally asked Iggy to work his usual magic. A few days later, he brought me one of the skimpiest profiles he'd ever compiled. Mr. Copeland, age seventy-six, wife (Bethany), two kids (Isaac and Leah). Kept his permanent residence in Blue Springs, Missouri, not half an hour from the house where I grew up. Inherited meat-packing money, invested and diversified. The usual things: real estate, defence, medical technology, resorts, a fashion line, a few cruise ships. Besides the house in Blue Springs, he had homes in Aspen and Palm Beach.

Iggy, who was usually quick to tease me (gently) about being a girl from flyover cow-town nowheresville, whose Midwest drawl still creeps now and then into her speech, had no jokes to crack. Instead, he put his hand on mine and said in his own inscrutable accent, "Eva, let me come with you."

I laughed. "Thanks, but I think I can handle some Warren Buffett type." And that's exactly what I pictured too, cowboy boots and an ancient Chevy pickup, as American as Jesse James and probably just as big a thief.

"He lives in a cave," Iggy said.

"A cave?"

He nodded and pulled up the location on Google Earth. "See?"

I'd been picturing a McMansion in the suburbs, or possibly a quiet ranch in the hills, with horses and a chicken coop. Instead, the map showed the address to be outside the Blue Springs city limits, at least ten miles away from anything. The street view showed an empty

stretch of two-lane highway, a perfectly normal looking mailbox, and a driveway that disappeared into a bluff.

I shrugged. “Missouri’s full of caves. I’ve heard of people building homes in them before. There’s even a whole underground business park.”

It was true. I also remembered a time when old missile silos had enjoyed a brief popularity out in western Kansas. People bought them and converted them into luxury homes. I didn’t see how a cave was so different from that, or from those earth berms that had been so popular in the seventies.

Iggy laughed uneasily. “It just seems weird to me, living underground.”

“It’s tornado alley. When a twister hits, it’s the safest place to be.”

I still had plenty of friends back in KC, so I planned to stay a few days. I booked a room on the Plaza, met up with folks for meals and drinks, and made my usual pilgrimages to the Nelson-Atkins and the Kemper. I went by the old house, too. It had since passed through the hands of several landlords and property management companies, and was even more rundown than when Dad and I had lived there. I’d kept a lot of my dad’s art and distributed the rest among friends. Some of it, I had on display in my home, the rest in storage. My mother’s painting hung on the wall in my office.

When the time came for me to meet up with Mr. Copeland, I drove my rental car east out of the city. It was a lovely spring afternoon, and I was awash in the golden glow of nostalgia.

So there was no reason, absolutely no reason at all, for me to feel a chill as I turned where the GPS directed me, exiting I-70 and following a series of winding back roads until I saw the lone mailbox.

I turned into the driveway, which stretched back through a copse of trees to the bluff. There were windows carved out of the limestone, and a rolling metal door. There was a security device in the overhang, where I pulled up and rang the buzzer. A voice asked me to identify myself. After I held my ID up to the camera, the voice said, “Please pull forward.”

Inside was a garage with a pristine sealed concrete floor and a row of vehicles: SUVs, both new and vintage sports cars, and yes, a truck. A Dodge, though, not a Chevy.

I got out of the car and a woman in her thirties greeted me. I assumed she was Copeland’s assistant. “Hello,” she extended her hand to shake. “I’m Sarah, we spoke on the phone.”

Her hand was warm and smooth as I clasped it. “Nice to meet you.”

She smiled, a bleached-white smile straight out of a Colgate ad. “We thought you might enjoy a quick tour before Richard joins us.”

“That’d be lovely, thank you.”

She led me through a metal door, up a staircase and into an entryway. It was like stepping into the lobby of a fancy hotel. The floor and walls were the natural, polished limestone, glittering with ore deposits. The ceiling soared twenty feet overhead, bare and white but for an immense Calder mobile. But even that paled in comparison with the centrepiece of the room: a natural waterfall spilling from a fissure in one of the walls, lush with vegetation, almost obscene in its twilit Arcadian greenness. Discreet, museum-quality overheads, combined with the windows I'd seen from outside, let in the most perfect light. There were paintings on the walls, Chagall, Modigliani, Franz Marc, mixed in with Japanese woodcuts and Flemish tapestries. Elegant little tables were platforms for Moores and Duchamps, as well as ancient statuary. There was Anubis, sleek and black, and a wonderful, freestanding marble Cerberus that stood at about hip height, curly-furred, and so purely Hellenistic. I could well imagine what all this cost, even at black market prices, and my curator's heart went into palpitations, wondering how all these pieces would fare long-term with the moisture from the waterfall.

The house was over 10,000 square feet, my guide told me. She showed me the living areas, some of the guest bedrooms and baths. There was a hydroponics area where they grew vegetables, as well as indoor gardens nourished by skylights, with more fountains and pools. And everywhere, more impressive and eclectic pieces of art. Of course, most of the rooms didn't have windows or any sort of natural light, but the place was so gorgeously appointed, you'd never notice.

At last, Mr. Copeland joined us. I was a bit surprised to see him kiss Sarah. It was more than friendly, his lips lingering very close to the corner of her mouth. My eyes skipped down to their hands—both were wearing wedding rings. Iggy's file had said the wife's name was Bethany, hadn't it? It was inconceivable to me that Iggy could be wrong about something so basic.

Copeland himself didn't look a day over fifty, tall, with silver hair and a silver beard, his face appealingly rugged and weather beaten (all that skiing in Aspen, swimming in Palm Beach). His clothes were understated and casual and no doubt his shoes alone cost as much as my first car. He greeted me warmly. "Ms. Peters, I'm so glad you're here. We were hoping you could join us for an early dinner."

By that point, I was so thoroughly bewitched by this temple of his, by this sanctuary of holy items, of course I said yes.

"Did you enjoy the tour?" he inquired as he led me to the dining room, his arm slung casually around Sarah's waist.

"Oh, yes," I said happily, and extolled, at some length, the virtues of his collection.

He laughed. "Oh, I can't take credit for much of it. Sarah here does the lion's share of acquiring and arranging. My tastes are actually quite different." Taking Sarah's hand in his, he kissed it. She laughed prettily and blushed.

I was careful not to react. "Oh?"

But that line of conversation was interrupted as we arrived in a spacious dining room—and it was a good thing that it was spacious. There was something of a small crowd gathered: four other women and two children.

All the women were so much like Sarah that, for a moment, I wondered if I was disrupting some sort of family visit. But that was silly—if that were the case, they wouldn't have invited me, right? But now, Sarah went to stand with the others. They were so alike, it was eerie, almost disorienting. All five women were slim, blond, tanned, in their thirties. But more than that, all five wore variations of the same business suit; all five had the exact same haircut, earlobe-length, straight and glossy, with a deep right part. All five wore identical gold wedding bands.

Feeling somewhat dazed, I glanced at the children in their midst. Two little girls, one about seven, the other maybe nine: miniature versions of their—mothers? Caretakers? Though their hair was long, secured with headbands. They wore pretty little spring dresses and ballet flats, peering up at me solemnly.

Copeland took his place at the head of the table. “Ms. Peters, this is my family. Of course, you’ve met Sarah. And this is Rachel, Hannah, Abby, and Ruth.” In turn, each of the women nodded, smiling, to me. “And this is Chloe and Dinah.” The little girls nodded as well. The younger one waved.

All Biblical names, I noted. There’s a large Mormon population in Kansas City, and I wondered if they were some quiet offshoot that kept to their polygamist roots. I donned my professional face, the one I wear with drug dealers and ultra-right conservatives. You don’t succeed at my job by showing disapproval, judgment or fear. Besides, I’d grown up around Rennies and Wiccans, for whom non-traditional cohabitation arrangements are just part of the scenery. It was curious, though, that the house didn’t exactly scream Jesus-lover to me. I’d seen no crosses mounted anywhere, no religious paintings on the walls. The only Christian artefact I’d seen, in fact, had been a 13th century ivory reliquary.

Whatever their deal was, it was none of my damn business, especially since everyone at the table seemed to be there of their own free will. In fact, the women did all the chatting while Copeland looked affectionately on.

We passed a pleasant hour swapping travel reminiscences while a silent domestic in black slacks and a white button-down served the meal. There was a green salad, followed by bourbon-pecan chicken, whipped potatoes and fresh sourdough rolls. Wine was offered for the adults (definitely not Mormon), and iced tea for the girls. For dessert, there was coffee and an assortment of fruit crepes to choose from.

It wasn’t until the meal wound down and the plates were cleared away that Copeland stood up. “Well, let’s get to business, shall we?”

“You bet.” I rose, too. I thanked the women for being such good hostesses, and followed Copeland where he beckoned—down a long hallway, past the kitchen, to what felt like a back door (it’s extraordinary how underground one loses all sense of direction).

“I want to show you what I think of as my gallery,” he said as he opened it. “My collection.”

The door revealed a metal staircase leading down. Automatic lights came on, revealing the steps before us. There was a muted rushing sound nearby. Must be the river that feeds the waterfall, I thought. The walls and ceiling that I could see were untouched here—just the rough underbelly of the bluff.

I'd only been in a cave once before. When I was a kid, one of our summer sojourns had taken us through Camdenton, and my father took me on a tour of Bridal Cave. The scent here reminded me of it, that strong, damp, mineral odour; dispelled from the main house, no doubt, by a state-of-the-art air purification system. With each successive flight, it grew noticeably cooler. By the time we'd gone down about sixty steps, my arms had broken out into gooseflesh. At the bottom, the limestone floor was swept clean, its surface uneven beneath the soles of our shoes. A few steps out into the darkness, and we tripped another motion sensor. Lights blazed on, illuminating a crude stone archway, beyond which lay Mr. Copeland's gallery.

The room was sort of a natural rotunda. Six large paintings were suspended from the ceiling on display cables. Copeland hung back, watching me as I paced slowly up and down, taking them in. The settings, to my eye, all appeared to be darkly romantic dreamscapes: a churchyard, a dark forest, a seaside cliff, a brick tunnel, a very old panelled room, a crumbling masonry vault. They were the sort of landscapes that would have excited the most demonic hallucinations in the imaginations of men like Blake and Coleridge, rendered in amazing photorealistic detail.

But the figures—God, the figures of these pieces, both human and inhuman. The artist had a real gift for facial expressions. They'd managed to convey both hellacious suffering and diabolical glee. The longer I looked at the images, the more unsettled I became. I'd dealt plenty of morbid art. I had a client in Wyoming who'd commissioned several works of Zdzislaw Beksinski before Beksinski's death. The client had engaged me to procure one of the artist's sketchbooks, as well as a painting that had survived that little bonfire back in '77. Until now, I thought Beksinski had painted the most nightmarish works I'd ever seen or ever would see. I'd viewed my share of Bosch's, Dore's, Munch's, Goya's. I'd grown up on '80s horror flicks, H.R. Giger's rubbery aliens, Freddy Krueger, The Thing. Even Ghostbusters' demon dogs, in theory, should have been more disturbing than this—moving pictures versus these frozen compilations of pigment.

And yet, I knew art's power. Here it was before me, using its mighty influence to drag to the fore all my most hidden and primal fears, to bend them into new and terrible shapes.

The painting of the churchyard was by far the worst. I found myself returning to it, unable to look away. It depicted a squatting circle of ghoulish, dog-like creatures. There was a blond child among them, a changeling. He sat cross-legged among the tombstones, learning to eat as the creatures ate, clutching a partially-gnawed limb to his face, his cheeks streaked with grave-dirt and gore and blood.

Copeland joined me, peering up at it. "This one's called The Lesson."

"Who's the artist?"

"Richard Upton Pickman."



I shook my head. “Never heard of him.”

“I didn’t expect you would. As you can see, he was technically very brilliant. For a time, he was a major up-and-comer on the New England art scene, back in the ‘20s. But when he started painting these, they shunned him. He’s since fallen into obscurity.”

“How did you hear of him?”

“My grandfather was originally from Boston. He passed away when I was twenty and left me this painting, along with the rest of my inheritance. I managed to acquire the rest over the years.”

“I’m sensing this is where I come in.”

Copeland smiled. “I’m looking for Pickman’s masterpiece, Ghoul Feeding.”

He described what he knew of it while I took some snapshots of his collection with my cell phone. Copeland brought a stepladder from under the staircase so I could climb up and examine more closely the artist’s brush style, his tiny signature on the back. The frames were all originals, Copeland said. Apparently, Pickman had mounted them all himself, so I made a note of that as well.

Copeland put a hand to the small of my back to help me down from the ladder—a courtly gesture. “You’re the ninth art dealer I’ve contacted to try and track it down. There’ll be no contract or anything, you understand.”

“I wouldn’t ask for one. That’s not how we do business.”

He nodded. “That’s what I’d heard. Find it, get it here, and I’ll pay whatever you think is fair. I am determined to complete the set.”

He extended his hand to shake, and I looked up into his face. Despite his expression, intent, serious, he was so normal, so wholesome-looking. I was about to ask him what it was he liked about these paintings, when I thought I heard something. A scratching in the walls, little claws skittering over stone.

Looking over Copeland’s shoulder, I spotted a hole at the base of the gallery wall. I hadn’t noticed it before because, of course, my attention had been drawn elsewhere. The hole was about twenty inches tall, an almost perfect Alice in Wonderland doorway. Kansas City is a town marked by waters. I’d seen river rats the size of terriers and wasn’t eager to meet one from the other side of the looking glass.

“Did you hear that?” I asked.

Copeland cocked his head, listening. “I don’t hear anything.”

“I’d hate to think you had rats down here. What if they managed to get at the paintings, or the cables? I’ve heard they can chew through just about anything.”

“Oh, no,” Copeland laughed. “They’d trigger the lights, and I think that keeps them away.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, why do you keep your gallery down here, anyway?”

“Ambience,” he said jauntily and nodded for me to follow him back upstairs.

As soon as I got back to my hotel room, I called Iggy. He bore the news that he’d really screwed the pooch on this one good-naturedly enough. I’d meant it mostly as a joke, but I could tell it really bothered him.

“Don’t worry,” he assured me. “We’ll find the painting. I think a few million dollars in finder’s fees will be consolation enough.”

“For you and me both, Iggs,” I agreed.

A few months went by. I had uneasy dreams. At the time, I just chalked it up to the general weirdness of the situation—Copeland as a latter-day upscale Charlie Manson, ruler of his domain, surrounded by doting female sycophants.

But that wasn’t what filled my dreams. In the whole bizarre equation, Copeland, it seemed, upset me the least. And why not? Those paintings were the creepiest things I’d ever seen, and they’d been born from a human imagination. What wasn’t there to be disturbed about?

The thing was, the situation didn’t just haunt my dreams, but my days too. I found myself suddenly uncomfortable in dark, enclosed areas. I could scarcely even open a closet anymore without having my phone flashlight on, ready to shine it into the dark corners. I even took my mother’s painting down from where it had hung on my wall for the past fourteen years, and replaced it with a cheerful watercolour.

It’ll be all right when we get the job done, I told myself. We’ll find the painting, we’ll get it to Copeland, we’ll get paid, and that will be the end of it.

Iggy’s crew eventually tracked the painting down to a private residence in Austin.

“How long?” I asked when he told me.

“Another month, give or take.”

At the four-and-a-half-week mark, a very dishevelled looking Iggy showed up on my doorstep. “Eva, there’s been some complications.”

“Police?”

He shook his head. “I’d rather not get into specifics, but one of my guys is gone.”

“Gone?” I breathed.

Going over to a chair, Iggy sat heavily down. “I still don’t have all the details, but we have the piece. It’s just not safe to move at this precise moment. But the other guy, he’s anxious to unload it. Call the client. Set a time for next week.”

“Aren’t you going to let me authenticate it first?”

“No need. It’s the real deal, just as the client described.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I saw it,” Iggy said with uncharacteristic shortness. “Just trust me on this. But when you deliver it, I’m going with you.”

“What’s going on?” I asked, alarmed.

He shook his head again. “It’s... I don’t know. It’s difficult to describe. The guy who has it now—well, you know none of my guys scare easily. But he says the painting scares him. He wants it gone.”

My stomach twisted as I stared at him. I’d never seen Iggy less than completely self-assured, he of the dapper Armanis and the eight-thousand-dollar Rolexes, never less than precise in his articulations. I did not recognize the stuttering mess before me.

“What happened to the other guy?” I asked.

For a moment, he put his head in his hands, ran his fingers through his hair. When he looked up at me, I noticed for the first time his eyes were bloodshot, and I knew without being told—he hadn’t been sleeping either.

“Iggy?” I pressed. “The guy you lost—”

“He tried to burn it,” he said hollowly. “He tried to burn it, but he ended up burning himself instead.”

A few days later, the man who’d been holding the painting delivered it to my garage. Iggy and I had rented a U-Haul so we could drive it to KC, and the man wheeled it right into the back of the truck using an industrial moving dolly. Sweat stood out on his brow, and not from exertion.

The painting itself had been crated. It was large, eleven by six feet. Iggy’s guy didn’t wait around for me to open it, and all but ran back to his own vehicle as soon as the wheels on the casters had stopped turning. He got in his car and peeled out of there.

Even if we stopped as little as possible, it was basically a two-day drive. We didn't sleep, and even waking felt like a dream. It was like transporting something incredibly toxic. It seemed to emit a low hum. You almost didn't notice it at first, but it built over time, seeping through the vents in the cab of the truck, making our heads throb and our teeth ache. But we were in charge of the thing now. To just dump it by the side of the road would be to set it loose.

It was night when we got to the Blue Springs exit. Our headlight beams illuminated the mailbox. We followed the driveway through the trees, and found the garage door standing open, waiting for us.

We parked the U-Haul and got out. The air was dank and chilly. The cave smell, which had been absent from this area before, now pervaded the place. Iggy opened the trailer door and extended the ramp. Together, we wheeled the crate and its contents down onto the floor.

Though neither of us said it, I think we were pretty much ready to just leave it there on the doorstep and book. Copeland could wire us the money. Or not. It didn't matter anymore.

But before we could close the trailer door, Sarah appeared, dressed as impeccably as she'd been before, despite the lateness of the hour. She clasped her hands together eagerly, blue eyes avid. "Ms. Peters," she greeted. "Richard's already down in the gallery, waiting for you. Would you like to bring the painting this way?"

Iggy and I exchanged a look. "Is that really necessary?" I asked.

"I know he'll want to thank you in person. He's so pleased you found it!" Reverently, she touched the crate. "We're all just... so pleased."

"How are we going to get it down there?"

"Oh, there's a service elevator. Here, I'll show you."

Deep down, a part of me didn't need persuading. I wanted to see the seven paintings together, the artist's vision complete. Sometimes, art takes us to places where we have no wish to go, but are inescapable. The subject insists upon the artist, and he must obey. Likewise, the viewer.

The elevator was in the back of the garage. Sarah selected Sub-Basement 4, and down we went. It opened into a semi-dark room. When we stepped out, I could see we were in the antechamber of Copeland's gallery—the bit of light there was coming from the lights on the stairs.

Copeland was there, waiting, along with his other four wives. His daughters, presumably, were upstairs in bed.

Now, he raised his fists, letting out what could only be described as a bellow, a sound of pure triumph. "Ahhhhh, let's see it!"

We came forward with the crate. Iggy produced a crowbar to pry open the top. Copeland stepped forward to lift the painting from its Styrofoam packing. I could see where Iggy's guy had tried to burn the thing—he'd succeeded in singeing the frame. But otherwise, the canvas itself was untouched.

If Copeland noticed, he said nothing. He did not speak at all, just gazed at it for a time, tears gathering in his eyes. His wives crowded around, looking at it, and at him, adoringly, making little breathy noises of appreciation.

Pickman's masterpiece was just as Copeland had described—a single, doglike creature, like those depicted in the rest of the ghoul pieces, only bigger. I realized, with a kind of sick jolt, that this was not art—this was, in fact, the opposite of art, some sort of blasphemy that I couldn't even begin to describe to myself. I thought of my father, dead amidst the temperas. I thought of my mother somewhere, with a shaved head and a saffron robe, drawing patterns in the sand. What had they spent their lives trying to get at, trying to summon forth?

Iggy helped him take the thing over to the gallery, where the stepladder was already waiting. New cables had been installed in the ceiling, ready for mounting. The women followed. It was hard to pick out individual movements—they seemed to move as one.

The men got the painting hung among its brethren. As soon as it had settled into place, there was that scratching sound again. Much bigger claws than what I'd heard before, accompanied by growling.

For a moment, I stood, paralyzed with fear. Then I turned, intending to bolt for the stairs, but I found my way blocked by three of Copeland's wives. The speed with which they'd shot past me was simply not human.

Behind me, Copeland said, "But you have to stay."

"Yes," Ruth added, flashing teeth as pearly-white as Sarah's. "Now the gate will be open always."

They pointed, and I turned to see the hole at the base of the wall. The scratching and growling grew louder, closer.

At last, in the opening, blond hair appeared, a face, then shoulders. It was a woman. She emerged, naked and streaked with dirt, her mouth smeared with blood.

"Dinah," I whispered.

Close behind her, came the second. Chloe. Both her and her sister now fully mature. They looked around with gleaming red eyes and smiled, their teeth jagged and sharp as stalagmites.

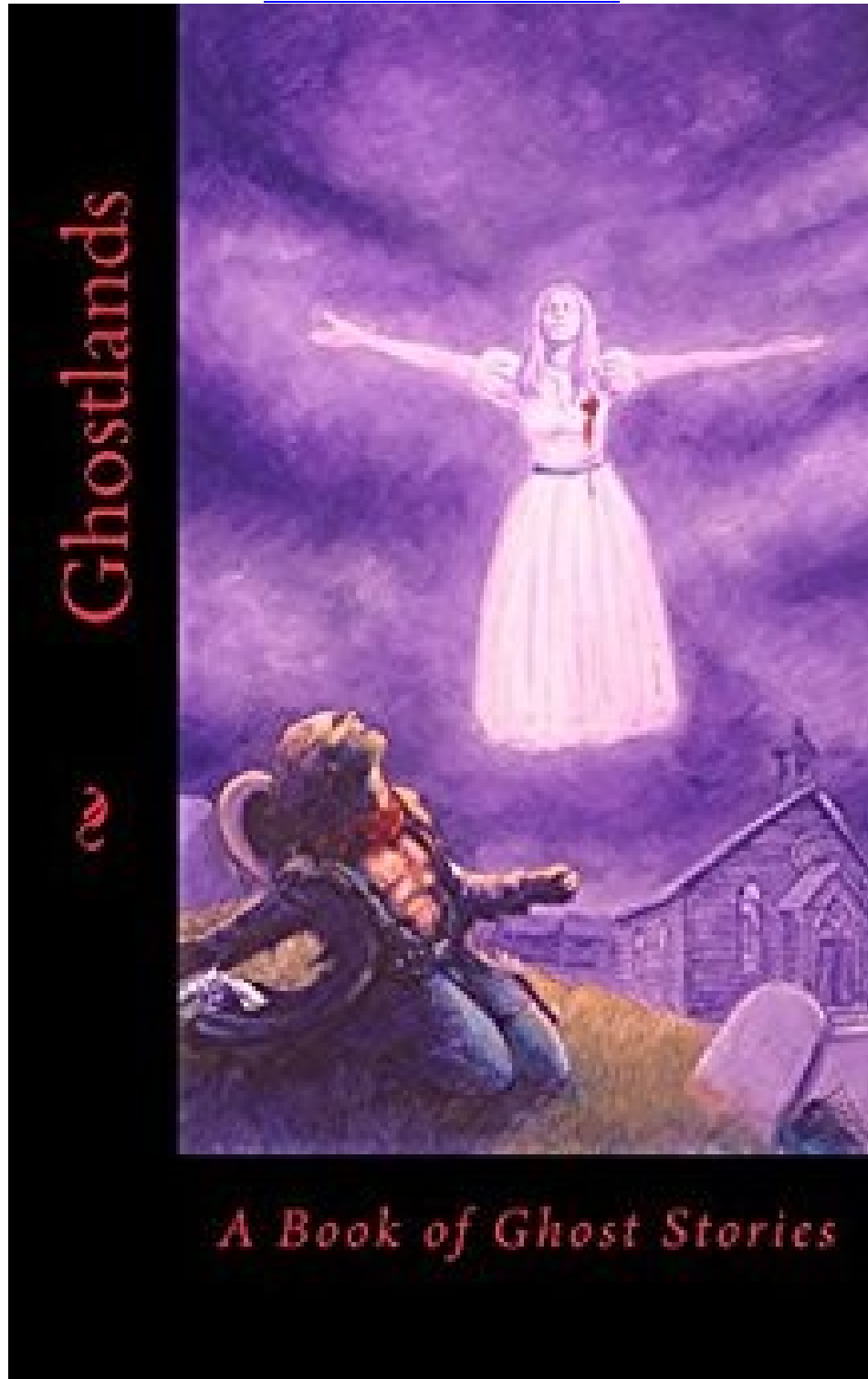
"The boys never come back," Copeland said. "Just the girls."

Copeland's wives advanced on us—there was no need to hurry. There was no way we could fight or outrun them, though Iggy had the crowbar still in hand. I was sure he had a gun on him somewhere, but I didn't think it would do us any good.

Copeland shot me what was almost an apologetic smile. “They always come back hungry.” As he spoke, I realized he was standing by the light switch, and now, he flipped it off.

THE END

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A BOOK OF GHOSTS by Sabine Baring-Gould

*Pomps and Vanities*

Colonel Mountjoy had an appointment in India that kept him there permanently. Consequently he was constrained to send his two daughters to England when they were quite children. His wife had died of cholera at Madras. The girls were Letice and Betty. There was a year's difference in their ages, but they were extraordinarily alike, so much so that they might have been supposed to be twins.

Letice was given up to the charge of Miss Mountjoy, her father's sister, and Betty to that of Lady Lacy, her maternal aunt. Their father would have preferred that his daughters should have been together, but there were difficulties in the way; neither of the ladies was inclined to be burdened with both, and if both had been placed with one the other might have regarded and resented this as a slight.

As the children grew up their likeness in feature became more close, but they diverged exceedingly in expression. A sullenness, an unhappy look, a towering fire of resentment characterised that of Letice, whereas the face of Betty was open and gay.

This difference was due to the difference in their bringing up. Lady Lacy, who had a small house in North Devon was a kindly, intellectual, and broad-minded old lady; of sweet disposition but a decided will. She saw a good deal of society, and did her best to train Betty to be an educated and liberal-minded woman of culture and graceful manners. She did not send her to school, but had her taught at home; and on the excuse that her eyes were weak by artificial light she made the girl read to her in the evenings, and always read books that were standard and calculated to increase her knowledge and to develop her understanding. Lady Lacy detested all shams, and under her influence Betty grew up to be thoroughly straightforward, healthy-minded, and true.

On the other hand, Miss Mountjoy was, as Letice called her, a Killjoy. She had herself been reared in the midst of the Clapham sect; had become rigid in all her ideas, narrow in all her sympathies, and a bundle of prejudices.

The present generation of young people know nothing of the system of repression that was exercised in that of their fathers and mothers. Now the tendency is wholly in the other direction, and too greatly so. It is possibly due to a revulsion of feeling against a training that is looked back upon with a shudder.

To that narrow school there existed but two categories of men and women, the Christians and the Worldlings, and those who pertained to it arrogated to themselves the former title. The Judgment had already begun with the severance of the sheep from the goats, and the saints who judged the world had their Jerusalem at Clapham.

In that school the works of the great masters of English literature, Shakespeare, Pope, Scott, Byron, were taboo; no work of imagination was tolerated save the Apocalypse, and that was degraded into a polemic by such scribblers as Elliot and Cumming.

No entertainments, not even the oratorios of Handel, were tolerated; they savoured of the world. The nearest approach to excitement was found in a missionary meeting. The Chinese

contract the feet of their daughters, but those English Claphamites cramped the minds of their children. The Venetians made use of an iron prison, with gradually contracting walls, that finally crushed the life out of the captive. But these elect Christians put their sons and daughters into a school that squeezed their energies and their intelligences to death.

Dickens caricatured such people in Mrs. Jellyby and Mr. Chadband; but he sketched them only in their external aspect, and left untouched their private action in distorting young minds, maiming their wills, damping down all youthful buoyancy.

But the result did not answer the expectations of those who adopted this system with the young. Some daughters, indeed, of weaker wills were permanently stunted and shaped on the approved model, but nearly all the sons, and most of the daughters, on obtaining their freedom, broke away into utter frivolity and dissipation, or, if they retained any religious impressions, galloped through the Church of England, performing strange antics on the way, and plunged into the arms of Rome.

Such was the system to which the high-spirited, strong-willed Letice was subjected, and from which was no escape. The consequence was that Letice tossed and bit at her chains, and that there ensued frequent outbreaks of resentment against her aunt.

“Oh, Aunt Hannah! I want something to read.”

After some demur, and disdainful rejection of more serious works, she was allowed Milton. Then she said, “Oh! I do love Comus.”

“Comus!” gasped Miss Mountjoy.

“And L’Allegro and Il Penseroso, they are not bad.”

“My child. These were the compositions of the immortal bard before his eyes were opened.”

“I thought, aunt, that he had dictated the Paradise Lost and Regained after he was blind.”

“I refer to the eyes of his soul,” said the old lady sternly.

“I want a story-book.”

“There is the Dairyman’s Daughter.”

“I have read it, and hate it.”

“I fear, Leticia, that you are in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity.”

Unhappily the sisters very rarely met one another. It was but occasionally that Lady Lacy and Betty came to town, and when they did, Miss Mountjoy put as many difficulties as she could in the way of their associating together.

On one such visit to London, Lady Lacy called and asked if she might take Letice with herself to the theatre. Miss Mountjoy shivered with horror, reared herself, and expressed her opinion of stage-plays and those who went to see them in strong and uncomplimentary terms.



As she had the custody of Letice, she would by no persuasion be induced to allow her to imperil her soul by going to such a wicked place. Lady Lacy was fain to withdraw in some dismay and much regret.

Poor Letice, who had heard this offer made, had flashed into sudden brightness and a tremor of joy; when it was refused, she burst into a flood of tears and an ecstasy of rage. She ran up to her room, and took and tore to pieces a volume of Clayton's Sermons, scattered the leaves over the floor, and stamped upon them.

"Letice," said Miss Mountjoy, when she saw the devastation, "you are a child of wrath."

"Why mayn't I go where there is something pretty to see? Why may I not hear good music? Why must I be kept forever in the Doleful Dumps?"

"Because all these things are of the world, worldly."

"If God hates all that is fair and beautiful, why did He create the peacock, the humming-bird, and the bird of paradise, instead of filling the world with barn-door fowls?"

"You have a carnal mind. You will never go to heaven."

"Lucky I—if the saints there do nothing but hold missionary meetings to convert one another. Pray what else can they do?"

"They are engaged in the worship of God."

"I don't know what that means. All I am acquainted with is the worship of the congregation. At Salem Chapel the minister faces it, mouths at it, gesticulates to it, harangues, flatters, fawns at it, and, indeed, prays at it. If that be all, heaven must be a deadly dull hole."

Miss Mountjoy reared herself, she became livid with wrath. "You wicked girl."

"Aunt," said Letice, intent on further incensing her, "I do wish you would let me go—just for once—to a Catholic church to see what the worship of God is."

"I would rather see you dead at my feet!" exclaimed the incensed lady, and stalked, rigid as a poker, out of the room.

Thus the unhappy girl grew up to woman's estate, her heart seething with rebellion. And then a terrible thing occurred. She caught scarlet fever, which took an unfavourable turn, and her life was despaired of. Miss Mountjoy was not one to conceal from the girl that her days were few, and her future condition hopeless.

Letice fought against the idea of dying so young.

"Oh, aunt! I won't die! I can't die! I have seen nothing of the pomps and vanities. I want to just taste them, and know what they are like. Oh! save me, make the doctor give me something to revive me. I want the pomps and vanities, oh! so much. I will not, I cannot die!" But her will, her struggle, availed nothing, and she passed away into the Great Unseen.

Miss Mountjoy wrote a formal letter to her brother, who had now become a general, to inform him of the lamented decease of his eldest daughter. It was not a comforting letter. It dwelt unnecessarily on the faults of Letice, it expressed no hopes as to her happiness in the world to which she had passed. There had been no signs of resignation at the last; no turning from the world with its pomps and vanities to better things, only a vain longing after what she could not have; a bitter resentment against Providence for having denied them to her; and a steeling of her heart against good and pious influences.

A year had passed.

Lacy had come to town along with her niece. A dear friend had placed her house at her disposal. She had herself gone to Dresden with her daughters to finish them off in music and German. Lady Lacy was very glad of the occasion, for Betty was now of an age to be brought out. There was to be a great ball at the house of the Countess of Belgrove, unto whom Lady Lacy was related, and at the ball Betty was to make her début.

The girl was in a condition of boundless excitement. A beautiful ball-dress of white satin, trimmed with rich Valenciennes lace, was laid over her chair for her to wear. Neat little white satin shoes stood on the floor, quite new, for her feet. In a flower-glass stood a red camellia that was destined to adorn her hair, and on the dressing-table, in a morocco case, was a pearl necklace that had belonged to her mother.

The maid did her hair, but the camellia, which was to be the only point of colour about her, except her rosy lips and flushed cheeks—that camellia was not to be put into her hair till the last minute.

The maid offered to help her to dress.

“No, thank you, Martha; I can do that perfectly well myself. I am accustomed to use my own hands, and I can take my own time about it.”

“But really, miss, I think you should allow me.”

“Indeed, no. There is plenty of time, and I shall go leisurely to work. When the carriage comes just the door and tell me, and I will rejoin my aunt.”

When the maid was gone, Betty locked her door. She lighted the candles beside the cheval—glass, and looked at herself in the mirror and laughed. For the first time, with glad surprise and innocent pleasure, she realised how pretty she was. And pretty she was indeed, with her pleasant face, honest eyes, finely arched brows, and twinkling smile that produced dimples in her cheeks.

“There is plenty of time,” she said. “I shan’t take a hundred years in dressing now that my hair is done.”

She yawned. A great heaviness had come over her. “I really think I shall have a nap first. I am dead sleepy now, and forty winks will set me up for the night.”

Then she laid herself upon the bed. A numbing, overpowering lethargy weighed on her, and almost at once she sank into a dreamless sleep. So unconscious was she that she did not hear Martha's tap at the door nor the roll of the carriage as it took her aunt away.

She woke with a start. It was full day.

For some moments she did not realise this fact, nor that she was still dressed in the gown in which she had lain down the previous evening.

She rose in dismay. She had slept so soundly that she had missed the ball. She rang her bell and unlocked the door.

"What, miss, up already?" asked the maid, coming in with a tray on which were tea and bread and butter.

"Yes, Martha. Oh! what will aunt say? I have slept so long and like a log, and never went to the ball. Why did you not call me?"

"Please, miss, you have forgotten. You went to the ball last night."

"No; I did not. I overslept myself."

The maid smiled. "If I may be so bold as to say so, I think, Miss Betty, you are dreaming still."

"No; I did not go."

The maid took up the satin dress. It was crumpled, the lace was a little torn, and the train showed unmistakable signs of having been drawn over a floor.

She then held up the shoes. They had been worn, and well worn, as if danced in all night.

"Look here, miss; here is your programme! Why, deary me! you must have had a lot of dancing. It is quite full."

Betty looked at the programme with dazed eyes; then at the camellia. It had lost some of its petals, and these had not fallen on the toilet-cover Where were they? What was the meaning of this?

"Martha, bring me my hot water, and leave me alone."

Betty was sorely perplexed. There were evidences that her dress had been worn. The pearl necklace was in the case, but not as she had left it—outside. She bathed her head in cold water. She racked her brain. She could not recall the smallest particular of the ball. She perused the programme. A light colour came into her cheek as she recognised the initials "C. F.," those of Captain Charles Fontanel, of whom of late she had seen a good deal. Other characters expressed nothing to her mind.

"How very strange!" she said; and I was lying on the bed in the dress I had on yesterday evening. I cannot explain it."

Twenty minutes later, Betty went downstairs and entered the breakfast-room. Lady Lacy was there. She went up to her aunt and kissed her.

“I am so sorry that I overslept myself,” she said. “I was like one of the Seven Sleepers.’ “My dear, I should not have minded if you had not come down till midday. After a first ball you must be tired.”

“I meant—last night.”

“How, last night?”

“I mean when I went to dress.”

“Oh, you were punctual enough. When I was ready you were already in the hall.” The bewilderment of the girl grew apace.

“I am sure,” said her aunt, “you enjoyed yourself. But you gave the lion’s share of the dances to Captain Fontanel. If this had been at Exeter, it would have caused talk; but here you are known only to a few; however, Lady Belgrove observed it.”

“I hope you are not very tired, auntie darling,” said Betty, to change slightly the theme that perplexed her.

“Nothing to speak of. I like to go to a ball; it recalls my old dancing days. But I thought you looked white and fagged all the evening. Perhaps it was excitement.”

As soon as breakfast was concluded, Betty escaped to her room. A fear was oppressing her. The only explanation of the mystery was that she had been to the dance in her sleep. She was a somnambulist. What had she said and done when unconscious? What a dreadful thing it would have been had she woke up in the middle of a dance! She must have dressed herself, gone to Lady Belgrove’s, danced all night, returned, taken off her dress, put on her afternoon tea-gown, lain down and concluded her sleep—all in one long tract of unconsciousness.

“By the way,” said her aunt next day, “I have taken tickets for Carmen, at Her Majesty’s. You would like to go?”

“Oh, delighted, aunt. I know some of the music—of course, the Toreador song; but I have never heard the whole opera. It will be delightful.”

“And you are not too tired to go?”

“No—ten thousand times, no—I shall love to see it.”

“What dress will you go in?”

“I think my black, and put a rose in my hair.”

“That will do very well. The black becomes you. I think you could not do better.” Betty was highly delighted. She had been to plays, never to a real opera.

In the evening, dinner was early, unnecessarily early, and Betty knew that it would not take her long to dress, so she went into the little conservatory and seated herself there. The scent of the heliotropes was strong. Betty called them cherry-pie. She had got the libretto, and she looked it over; but as she looked, her eyes closed, and without being aware that she was going to sleep, in a moment she was completely unconscious.

She woke, feeling stiff and cold.

“Goodness!” said she, “I hope I am not late. Why—what is that light?” The glimmer of dawn shone in at the conservatory windows.

Much astonished, she left it. The hall, the staircase were dark. She groped her way to her room, and switched on the electric light.

Before her lay her black-and-white muslin dress on the bed; on the table were her white twelve-button gloves folded about her fan. She took them up, and below them, somewhat crumpled, lay the play-bill, scented.

“How very unaccountable this is,” she said; and removing the dress, seated herself on the bed and thought.

“Why did they turn out the lights?” she asked herself, then sprang to her feet, switched off the electric current, and saw that actually the morning light was entering the room. She resumed her seat; put her hands to her brow.

“It cannot—it cannot be that this dreadful thing has happened again.” Presently she heard the servants stirring. She hastily undressed and retired between the sheets, but not to sleep. Her mind worked. She was seriously alarmed. At the usual time Martha arrived with tea.

“Awake, Miss Betty!” she said, “I hope you had a evening. I dare say it was beautiful.”

“But,” began the girl, then checked herself, and said—

“Is my aunt getting up? Is she very tired?”

“Oh, miss, my lady is a wonderful person; she never seems to tire. She is always down at the same time.”

Betty dressed, but her mind was in a turmoil. On one thing she was resolved. She must see a doctor. But she would not frighten her aunt, she would keep the matter close from her.

When she came into the breakfast-room, Lady Lacy said—

“I thought Maas’s voice was superb, but I did not so much care for the Carmen. What did you think, dear?”

“Aunt,” said Betty, anxious to change the topic, “would you mind my seeing a doctor? I don’t think I am quite well.”

“Not well! Why what is the matter with you?”

“I have such dead fits of drowsiness.”

“My dearest, is that to be wondered at with this racketing about; balls and theatres—very other than the quiet life at home? But I will admit that you struck me as looking very pale last night. You shall certainly see Dr. Groves.”

When the medical man arrived, Betty intimated that she wished to speak with him alone, and he was shown with her into the morning-room.

“Oh, Dr. Groves,” she said nervously, “it is such a strange thing I have to say. I believe I walk in my sleep.”

“You have eaten something that disagreed with you.”

“But it lasted so long.”

“How do you mean? Have you long been subject to it?”

“Dear, no. I never had any signs of it before I came to London this season.”

“And how were you roused? How did you become aware of it?”

“I was not roused at all; the fact is I went asleep to Lady Belgrove’s ball, and danced there and came back, and woke up in the morning without knowing I had been.”

“What!”

“And then, last night, I went in my sleep to Her Majesty’s and heard Carmen; but I woke up in the conservatory here at early dawn, and I remember nothing about it.”

“This is a very extraordinary story. Are you sure you to the ball and to the opera?”

“Quite sure. My dress had been used on both occasions, and my shoes and fan and gloves as well.”

“Did you go with Lady Lacy?”

“Oh, yes. I was with her all the time. But I remember nothing about it.”

“I must speak to her ladyship.”

“Please, please do not. It would frighten her; and I do not wish her to suspect anything, except that I am a little out of sorts. She gets nervous about me.”

Dr. Groves mused for some while, then he said: “I cannot see that this is at all a case of somnambulism.”

“What is it, then?”

“Lapse of memory. Have you ever suffered from that previously?”

“Nothing to speak of. Of course I do not always remember everything. I do not always recollect commissions given to me, unless I write them down. And I cannot say that I remember all the novels I have read, or what was the menu at dinner yesterday.”

“That is quite a different matter. What I refer to is spaces of blank in your memory. How often has this occurred?”

“Twice.”

“And quite recently?”

“Yes, I never knew anything of the kind before.”

“I think that the sooner you return to the country the better. It is possible that the strain of coming out and the change of entering into gay life in town has been too much for you. Take care and economise your pleasures. Do not attempt too much; and if anything of the sort happens again, send for me.”

“Then you won’t mention this to my aunt?”

“No, not this time. I will say that you have been a little overwrought and must be spared too much excitement.”

“Thank you so much, Dr. Groves.”

Now it was that a new mystery came to confound Betty. She rang her bell. “Martha,” said she, when her maid appeared, “where is that novel I had yesterday from the circulating library? I put it on the boudoir table.”

“I have not noticed it, miss.”

“Please look for it. I have hunted everywhere for it, and it cannot be found.”

“I will look in the parlour, miss, and the schoolroom.”

“I have not been into the schoolroom at all, and I know that it is not in the drawing-room.” A search was instituted, but the book could not be found. On the morrow it was in the boudoir, where Betty had placed it on her return from Mudie’s.

“One of the maids took it,” was her explanation. She did not much care for the book; perhaps that was due to her preoccupation, and not to any lack of stirring incident in the story. She sent it back and took out another. Next morning that also had disappeared.

It now became customary, as surely as she drew a novel from the library, that it vanished clean away. Betty was greatly amazed. She could not read a novel she had brought home till a day or two later. She took to putting the book, so soon as it was in the house, into one of her drawers, or into a cupboard. But the result was the same. Finally, when she had locked the

newly acquired volume in her desk, and it had disappeared thence also, her patience gave way. There must be one of the domestics with a ravenous appetite for fiction, which drove her to carry off a book of the sort whenever it came into the house, and even to tamper with a lock to obtain it. Betty had most reluctantly to speak of the matter to her aunt, but now she made to her a formal complaint.

The servants were all questioned, and strongly protested their innocence. Not one of them had ventured to do such a thing as that with which they were charged.

However, from this time forward the annoyance ceased, and Betty and Lady Lacy naturally concluded that this was the result of the stir that had been made.

“Betty,” said Lady Lacy, “what do you say to going to the new play at the Gaiety? I hear it very highly spoken of. Mrs. Fontanel has a box and has asked if we will join her.”

“I should love it,” replied the girl; “we have been rather quiet of late.” But her heart was oppressed with fear.

She said to her maid: “Martha, will you dress me this evening—and—pray stay with me till my aunt is ready and calls for me?”

“Yes, miss, I shall be pleased to do so.” But the girl looked somewhat surprised at the latter part of the request.

Betty thought well to explain: “I don’t know what it is, but I feel somewhat out of spirits and nervous, and am afraid of being left alone, lest something should happen.”

“Happen, miss! If you are not feeling well, would it not be as well to stay at home?”

“Oh, not for the world! I must go. I shall be all right so, soon as I am in the carriage. It will pass off then.”

“Shall I get you a glass of sherry, or anything?”

“No, no, it is not that. You remain with me and I shall be myself again.” That evening Betty went to the theatre. There was no recurrence of the sleeping fit with its concomitants. Captain Fontanel was in the box, and made himself vastly agreeable. He had his seat by Betty, and talked to her not only between the acts, but also a good deal whilst the actors were on the stage. With this she could have dispensed. She was not such an habituée of the theatre as not to be intensely interested with what was enacted before her.

Between two of the acts he said to her: “My mother is engaging Lady Lacy. She has a scheme in her head, but wants her consent to carry it out, to make it quite too charming. And I am deputed to get you to acquiesce.”

“What is it?”

“We purpose having a boat and going to the Henley Regatta. Will you come?”



“I should enjoy it above everything. I have never seen a regatta—that is to say, not one so famous, and not of this kind. There were regattas at Ilfracombe, but they were different.”

“Very well, then; the party shall consist only of my mother and sister and your two selves, and young Fulwell, who is dancing attendance on Jannet, and Putsey, who is a tame cat. I am sure my mother will persuade your aunt. What a lively old lady she is, and for her years how she does enjoy life!”

“It will be a most happy conclusion to our stay in town,” said Betty. “We are going back to auntie’s little cottage in Devon in a few days; she wants to be at home for Good Friday and Easter Day.”

So it was settled. Lady Lacy had raised no objection, and now she and her niece had to consider what Betty should wear. Thin garments were out of the question; the weather was too cold, and it would be especially chilly on the river. Betty was still in slight mourning, so she chose a silver-grey cloth costume, with a black band about her waist, and a white straw hat, with a ribbon to match her gown.

On the day of the regatta Betty said to herself; “How ignorant I am! Fancy my not knowing where Henley is! That it is on the Thames or Isis I really do not know, but I fancy on the former—yes, I am almost positive it is on Thames. I have seen pictures in the Graphic and Illustrated of the race last year, and I know the river was represented as broad, and the Isis can only be an insignificant stream. I will run into the schoolroom and find a map of the environs of London and post myself up in the geography. One hates to look like a fool.”

Without a word to anyone, Betty found her way to the apartment given up to lessons when children were in the house. It lay at the back, down a passage. Since Lady Lacy had occupied the place, neither she nor Betty had been in it more than casually and rarely; and accordingly the servants had neglected to keep it clean. A good deal of dust lay about, and Betty, laughing, wrote her name in the fine powder on the school-table, then looked at her finger, found it black, and said, “Oh, bother! I forgot that the dust of London is smut.”

She went to the bookcase, and groped for a map of the Metropolis and the country round, but could not find one. Nor could she lay her hand on a gazetteer.

“This must do,” said she, drawing out a large, thick Johnston’s Atlas, “if the scale be not too small to give Henley.”

She put the heavy volume on the table and opened it. England, she found, was in two parts, one map of the Northern, the second of the Southern division. She spread out the latter, placed her finger on the blue line of the Thames, and began to trace it up.

Whilst her eyes were on it, searching the small print, they closed, and without being conscious that she was sleepy, her head bowed forward on the map, and she was breathing evenly, steeped in the most profound slumber.

She woke slowly. Her consciousness returned to her little by little. She saw the atlas without understanding what it meant. She looked about her, and wondered how she could be in the schoolroom, and she then observed that darkness was closing in. Only then, suddenly, did she recall what had brought her where she was.

Next, with a rush, upon her came the remembrance that she was due at the boat-race. She must again have overslept herself for the evening had come on, and through the window she could see the glimmer of gaslights in the street. Was this to be accompanied by her former experiences?

With throbbing heart she went into the passage. Then she noticed that the hall was lighted up, and she heard her aunt speaking, and the slam of the front door, and the maid say, "Shall I take off your wraps, my lady?"

She stepped forth upon the landing and proceeded to descend, when—with a shock that sent the blood coursing to her heart, and that paralysed her movements—she saw herself ascending the stair in her silver-grey costume and straw hat.

She clung to the banister, with convulsive grip, lest she should fall, and stared, without power to utter a sound, as she saw herself quietly mount, step by step, pass her, go beyond to her own room.

For fully ten minutes she remained rooted to the spot, unable to stir even a finger. Her tongue was stiff; her muscles set, her heart ceased to beat.

Then slowly her blood began again to circulate, her nerves to relax, power of movement returned. With a hoarse gasp she reeled from her place, and giddy, touching the banister every moment to prevent herself from falling, she crept downstairs. But when once in the hall, she had recovered flexibility. She ran towards the morning-room, whither Lady Lacy had gone to gather up the letters that had arrived by post during her absence.

Betty stood looking at her, speechless.

Her aunt raised her face from an envelope she was considering. "Why, Betty," said she, "how expeditiously you have changed your dress!"

The girl could not speak, but fell unconscious on the floor.

When she came to herself, she was aware of a strong smell of vinegar. She was lying on the sofa, and Martha was applying a moistened kerchief to her brow. Lady Lacy stood by, alarmed and anxious, with a bottle of smelling-salts in her hand.

"Oh, aunt, I saw—" then she ceased. It would not do to tell of the apparition. She would not be believed.

"My darling," said Lady Lacy, "you are overdone, and it was foolish of you tearing upstairs and scrambling into your morning-gown. I have sent for Groves. Are you able now to rise? Can you manage to reach your room?"

"My room!" she shuddered. "Let me lie here a little longer. I cannot walk. Let me be here till the doctor comes."

"Certainly, dearest. I thought you looked very unlike yourself all day at the regatta. If you had felt out of sorts you ought not to have gone."

“Auntie! I was quite well in the morning.”

Presently the medical man arrived, and was shown in. Betty saw that Lady Lacy purposed staying through the interview. Accordingly she said nothing to Dr. Groves about what she had seen.

“She is overdone,” said he. “The sooner you move her down to Devonshire the better. Someone had better be in her room to-night.

“Yes,” said Lady Lacy; “I had thought of that and have given orders. Martha can make up her bed on the sofa in the adjoining dressing-room or boudoir.”

This was a relief to Betty, who dreaded a return to her to her room—her room into which her other self had gone.

“I will call again in the morning,” said the medical man; “keep her in bed to-morrow, at all events till I have seen her.”

When he left, Betty found herself able to ascend the stairs. She cast a frightened glance about her room. The straw hat, the grey dress were there. No one was in it.

She was helped to bed, and although laid in it with her head among the pillows, she could not sleep. Racking thoughts tortured her. What was the signification of that encounter? What of her strange sleeps? What of those mysterious appearances of herself where she had not been? The theory that she had walked in her sleep was untenable. How was she to solve the riddle? That she was going out of her mind was no explanation.

Only towards morning did she doze off.

When Dr. Groves came, about eleven o’clock, Betty made a point of speaking to him alone, which was what she greatly desired.

She said to him: “Oh! it has been worse this last occasion, far worse than before. I do not walk in my sleep. Whilst I am buried in slumber, someone else takes my place.”

“Whom do you mean? Surely not one of the maids?”

“Oh, no. I met her on the stairs last night, that is what made me faint.”

“Whom did you meet?”

“Myself—my double.”

“Nonsense, Miss Mountjoy.”

“But it is a fact. I saw myself as clearly as I see you now. I was going down into the hall.”

“You saw yourself! You saw your own pleasant, pretty face in a looking-glass.”

“There is no looking-glass on the staircase. Besides, I was in my alpaca morning-gown, and my double had on my pearl-grey cloth costume, with my straw hat. She was mounting as I was descending.”

“Tell me the story.”

“I went yesterday—an hour or so before I had to dress—into the schoolroom. I am awfully ignorant, and I did want to see a map and find out where was Henley because, you know, I was going to the boat-race. And I dropped off into one of those dreadful dead sleeps, with my head on the atlas. When I awoke it was evening, and the gas-lamps were lighted. I was frightened, and ran out to the landing and I heard them arrive, just come back from Henley, and as I was going down the stairs, I saw my double coming up, and we met face to face. She passed me by, and went on to my room—to this room. So you see this is proof pos that I am not a somnambulist.”

“I never said that you were. I never for a moment admitted the supposition. That, if you remember, was your own idea. What I said before is what I repeat now, that you suffer from failure of memory.”

“But that cannot be so, Dr. Groves.”

“Pray, why not?”

“Because I saw my double, wearing my regatta costume.”

“I hold to my opinion, Miss Mountjoy. If you will listen to me I shall be able to offer a satisfactory explanation. Satisfactory, I mean, so far as to make your experiences intelligible to you. I do not at all imply that your condition is satisfactory.”

“Well, tell me. I cannot make heads or tails of this matter.”

“It is this, young lady. On several recent occasions you have suffered from lapses of memory. All recollection of what you did, where you went, what you said, has been clean wiped out. But on this last—it was somewhat different. The failure took place on your return, and you forgot everything that had happened since you were engaged in the schoolroom looking at the atlas.”

“Yes.”

“Then, on your arrival here, as Lady Lacy told me, you ran upstairs, and in a prodigious hurry changed your clothes and put on your——”

“My alpaca.”

“Your alpaca, yes. Then, in descending to the hall, your memory came back, but was still entangled with flying reminiscences of what had taken place during the intervening period. Amongst other things——”

“I remember no other things.”

“You recalled confusedly one thing only, that you had mounted the stairs in your—your—”

“My pearl-grey cloth, with the straw hat and satin ribbon.”

“Precisely. Whilst in your morning gown, into which you had scrambled, you recalled yourself in your regatta costume going upstairs to change. This fragmentary reminiscence presented itself before you as a vision. Actually you saw nothing. The impression on your brain of a scrap recollected appeared to you as if it had been an actual object depicted on the retina of your eye. Such things happen, and happen not infrequently. In cases of D. T.—”

“But I haven’t D. T. I don’t drink.”

“I do not say that. If you will allow me to proceed. In cases of D. T. the patient fancies he sees rats, devils, all sorts of objects. They appear to him as obvious realities, he thinks that he sees them with his eyes. But he does not. These are mere pictures formed on the brain.”

“Then you hold that I really was at the boat-race?”

“I am positive that you were.”

“And that I danced at Lady Belgrove’s ball?”

“Most assuredly.”

“And heard Carmen at Her Majesty’s?”

“I have not the remotest doubt that you did.” Betty drew a long breath, and remained in consideration. Then she said very gravely: “I want you to tell me, Dr. Groves, quite truthfully, quite frankly— do not think that I shall be frightened whatever you say; I shall merely prepare for what may be—do you consider that I am going out of my mind?”

“I have not the least occasion for supposing so.”

“That,” said Betty, “would be the most terrible thing of all. If I thought that, I would say right out to my aunt that I wished at once to be sent to an asylum.”

“You may set your mind at rest on that score.”

“But loss of memory is bad, but better than the other. Will these fits of failure come on again?”

“That is more than I can prognosticate; let us hope for the best. A complete change of scene, change of air, change of association—”

“Not to leave auntie!”

“No. I do not mean that, but to get away from London society. It may restore you to what you were. You never had those fits before?”

“Never, never, till I came to town.”

“And when you have left town they may not recur.”

“I shall take precious good care not to revisit London if it is going to play these tricks with me.”

That day Captain Fontanel called, and was vastly concerned to hear that Betty was unwell. She was not looking herself, he said, at the boat-race, he feared that the cold on the river had been too much for her. But he did trust that he might be allowed to have a word with her before she returned to Devonshire.

Although he did not see Betty, he had an hour’s conversation with Lady Lacy, and he departed with a smile on his face.

On the morrow he called again Betty had so completely recovered that she was cheerful, and the pleasant colour had returned to her cheeks. She was in the drawing-room along with her aunt when he arrived.

The captain offered his condolences, and expressed his satisfaction that her indisposition had been so quickly got over.

“Oh!” said the girl, “I am as right as a trivet. It has all passed off. I need not have soaked in bed all yesterday, but that aunt would have it so. We are going down to our home to-morrow. Yesterday auntie was scared and thought she would have to postpone our return.”

Lady Lacy rose, made the excuse that she had the packing to attend to, and left the young people alone together. When the door was shut behind her, Captain Fontanel drew his chair close to that of the girl and said— “Betty, you do not know how happy I have felt since you accepted me. It was a hurried affair in the boathouse, but really, time was running short; as you were off so soon to Devonshire, I had to snatch at the occasion when there was no one by, so I seized old Time by the forelock, and you were so good as to say ‘Yes.’”

“I—I——” stammered Betty.

“But as the thing was done in such haste, I came here to-day to renew my offer of myself, and to make sure of my happiness. You have had time to reflect, and I trust you do not repent.”

“Oh, you are so good and kind to me!”

“Dearest Betty, what a thing to say! It is I—poor, wretched, good-for-naught—who have cause to speak such words to you. Put your hand into mine; it is a short courtship of a soldier, like that of Harry V. and the fair Maid of France. ‘I love you: then if you urge me farther than to say, “Do you in faith?” I wear out my suit. Give me your answer; i’ faith, do: and so clap hands and a bargain.’ Am I quoting aright?”

Shyly, hesitatingly, she extended her fingers, and he clasped them. Then, shrinking back and looking down, she said: “But I ought to tell you something first, something very serious, which

may make you change your mind. I do not, in conscience, feel it right that you should commit yourself till you know.”

“It must be something very dreadful to make me do that.”

“It is dreadful. I am apt to be terribly forgetful.”

“Bless me! So am I. I have passed several of my acquaintances lately and have not recognised them, but that was because I was thinking of you. And I fear I have been very oblivious about my bills; and as to answering letters—good heavens! I am a shocking defaulter.”

“I do not mean that. I have lapses of memory. Why, I do not even remember——” He sealed her lips with a kiss. “You will not forget this, at any rate, Betty.”

“Oh, Charlie, no!”

“Then consider this, Betty. Our engagement cannot be for long. I am ordered to Egypt, and I positively must take my dear little wife with me and show her the Pyramids. You would like to see them, would you not?”

“I should love to.”

“And the Sphinx?”

“Indeed I should.”

“And Pompey’s Pillar?”

“Oh, Charlie! I shall love above everything to see you every day.”

“That is prettily said. I see we understand one another. Now, hearken to me, give me your close attention, and no fits of lapse of memory over what I now say, please. We must be married very shortly. I positively will not go out without you. I would rather throw up my commission.”

“But what about papa’s consent?”

“I shall wire to him full particulars as to my position, income and prospects, also how much I love you, and how I will do my level best to make you happy. That is the approved formula in addressing paterfamilias, I think. Then he will telegraph back, ‘Bless you, my boy’; and all is settled. I know that Lady Lacy approves.”

“But dear, dear aunt. She will be so awfully lonely without me.”

“She shall not be. She has no ties to hold her to the little cottage in Devon. She shall come out to us in Cairo, and we will bury the dear old girl up to her neck in the sand of the desert, and make a second Sphinx of her, and bake the rheumatism out of her bones. It will cure her of all her aches, as sure as my name is Charlie, and yours will be Fontanel.”

“Don’t be too sure of that.”

“But I am sure—you cannot forget.”

“I will try not to do so. Oh, Charlie, don’t!”

Mrs. Thomas, the dressmaker, and Miss Crock, the milliner, had their hands full. Betty’s trousseau had to be got ready expeditiously. Patterns of materials specially adapted for a hot climate—light, beautiful, artistic, of silks and muslins and prints—had to be commanded from Liberty’s. Then came the selection, then the ordering, then the discussions with the dressmaker, and the measurings. Next the fittings, for which repeated visits had to be made to Mrs. Thomas. Adjustments, alterations were made, easements under the arms, tightenings about the waist. There were fulnesses to be taken in and skimpiness to be redressed. The skirts had to be sufficiently short in front and sufficiently long behind.

As for the wedding-dress, Mrs. Thomas was not regarded as quite competent to execute such a masterpiece. For that an expedition had to be made to Exeter.

The wedding-cake must be ordered from Murch, in the cathedral city. Lady Lacy was particular that as much as possible of the outfit should be given to county tradesmen. A riding habit, tailor-made, was ordered, to fit like a glove, and a lady’s saddle must be taken out to Egypt. Boxes, basket-trunks were to be procured, and a correspondence carried on as to the amount of personal luggage allowed.

Lady Lacy and Betty were constantly running up by express to Exeter about this, that, and everything.

Then ensued the sending out of the invitations, and the arrival of wedding presents, that entailed the writing of gushing letters of acknowledgment and thanks, by Betty herself. But these were not allowed to interfere with the scribbling of four pages every day to Captain Fontanel, intended for his eyes alone.

Interviews were sought by the editors or agents of local newspapers to ascertain whether reporters were desired to describe the wedding, and as to the length of the notices that were to be inserted, whether all the names of the donors of presents were to be included, and their gifts registered. Verily Lady Lacy and Betty were kept in a whirl of excitement, and their time occupied from morning till night, and their brains exercised from night to morning. Glass and china and plate had to be hired for the occasion, wine ordered. Fruit, cake, ices commanded. But all things come to an end, even the preparations for a wedding.

At last the eventful day arrived, bright and sunny, a true May morning. The bridesmaids arrived, each wearing the pretty brooch presented by Captain Fontanel. Their costume was suitable to the season, of primrose-yellow, with hats turned up, white, with primroses. The pages were in green velvet, with knee-breeches and three-cornered hats, lace ruffles and lace fronts. The butler had made the claret-cup and the champagne-cup, and after a skirmish over the neighbourhood some borage had been obtained to float on the top. Lady Lacy was to hold a reception after the ceremony, and a marquee had been erected in the grounds, as the cottage could not contain all the guests invited. The dining-room was delivered over for the exposing of the presents. A carriage had been commanded to convey the happy couple to the station,



horses and driver with white favours. With a sigh of relief in the morning, Lady Lacy declared that she believed that nothing had been forgotten.

The trunks stood ready packed, all but one, and labelled with the name of Mrs. Fontanel. A flag flew on the church tower. The villagers had constructed a triumphal arch at the entrance to the grounds. The people from farms and cottages had all turned out, and were already congregating about the churchyard, with smiles and heartfelt wishes for the happiness of the bride, who was a mighty favourite with them, as indeed was also Lady Lacy.

The Sunday-school children had clubbed their pence, and had presented Betty, who had taught them, with a silver set of mustard-pot, pepper caster, and salt-cellar.

“Oh, dear!” said Betty, “what shall I do with all these sets of mustard—and pepper-pots? I have now received eight.”

“A little later, dear,” replied her aunt, “you can exchange those that you do not require.”

“But never that set given me by my Sunday-school pets,” said Betty.

Then came in flights of telegrams of congratulation.

And at the last moment arrived some more wedding presents.

“Good gracious me!” exclaimed the girl, “I really must manage to acknowledge these. There will be just time before I begin to dress.”

So she tripped upstairs to her boudoir, a little room given over to herself in which to do her water-colour painting, her reading, to practise her music. A bright little room to which now, as she felt with an ache, she was to bid an eternal good-bye!

What happy hours had been spent in it! What daydreams had been spun there! She opened her writing-case and wrote the required letters of thanks.

“There,” said she, when she had signed the fifth. “This is the last time I shall subscribe myself Elizabeth Mount except when I sign my name in the church register. Oh! how my back is hurting me. I was not in bed till two o’clock and was up again at seven, and I have been on the tear for the whole week. There will be just time for me to rest it before the business of the dressing begins.”

She threw herself on the sofa and put up her feet. Instantly she was asleep—in a sound, dreamless sleep.

When Betty opened her eyes she heard the church bells ringing a merry peal. Then she raised her lids, and turning her head on the sofa cushion saw—a bride, herself in full bridal dress, with the white veil and the orange-blossoms, seated at her side. The gloves had been removed and lay on the lap.

An indescribable terror held her fast. She could not cry out. She could not stir. She could only look.

Then the bride put back the veil, and Betty, studying the white face, saw that this actually was not herself; it was her dead sister, Letice.

The apparition put forth a hand and laid it on her and spoke: "Do not be frightened. I will do you no harm. I love you too dearly for that, Betty. I have been married in your name; I have exchanged vows in your name; I have received the ring for you; put it on your finger, it is not mine; it in no way belongs to me. In your name I signed the register. You are married to Charles Fontanel and not I. Listen to me. I will tell you all, and when I have told you everything you will see me no more. I will trouble you no further; I shall enter into my rest. You will see before you only the wedding garments remaining. I shall be gone. Harken to me. When I was dying, I died in frantic despair, because I had never known what were the pleasures of life. My last cries, my last regrets, my last longings were for the pomps and vanities."

She paused, and slipped the gold hoop on to the forefinger of Betty's hand. Then she proceeded— "When my spirit parted from my body, it remained a while irresolute whither to go. But then, remembering that my aunt had declared that I never would go to Heaven, I resolved on forcing my way in there out of defiance; and I soared till I reached the gates of Paradise. At them stood an angel with a fiery sword drawn in his hand, and he laid it athwart the entrance. I approached, but he waved me off, and when the point of the flaming blade touched my heart, there passed a pang through it, I know not whether of joy or of sorrow. And he said: 'Letice, you have not been a good girl; you were sullen, resentful, rebellious, and therefore are unfit to enter here. Your longings through life, and to the moment of death, were for the world and its pomps and vanities. The last throb of your heart was given to repining for them. But your faults were due largely to the mistakes of your rearing. And now hear your judgment. You shall not pass within these gates till you have returned to earth and partaken of and had your fill of its pomps and vanities. As for that old cat, your aunt'—but no, Betty, he did not say quite that; I put it in, and I ought not to have done so. I bear her no resentment; I wish her no ill. She did by me what she believed to be right. She acted towards me up to her lights; alas for me that the light which was in her was darkness! The angel said: 'As for your aunt, before she can enter here, she will want illumining, enlarging, and sweetening, and will have to pass through Purgatory.' And oh, Betty, that will be gall and bitterness to her, for she did not believe in Purgatory, and she wrote a controversial pamphlet against it. Then said the angel: 'Return, return to the pomps and vanities.' I fell on my knees, and said: 'Oh, suffer me but to have one glimpse of that which is within!' 'Be it so,' he replied. 'One glimpse only whilst I cast my sword on high.' Thereat he threw up the flaming brand, and it was as though a glorious flash of lightning filled all space. At the same moment the gates swung apart, and I saw what was beyond. It was but for one brief moment, for the sword came down, and the angel caught it by the handle, and instantly the gates were shut. Then, sorrowfully, I turned myself about and went back to earth. And, Betty, it was I who took and read your novels. It was I who went to Lady Belgrove's ball in your place. It was I who sat instead of you at Her Majesty's and heard Carmen. It was I who took your place at Henley Regatta, and I—I, instead of you, received the protestation of Charles Fontanel's affection, and there in the boat-house I received the first and last kiss of love. And it was I, Betty, as I have told you, who took your place at the altar to-day. I had the pleasures that were designed for you—the ball-dress, the dances, the fair words, the music of the opera, the courtship, the excitement of the regatta, the reading of sensational novels. It was I who had what all girls most long for, their most supreme bliss of wearing the wedding-veil and the orange—blossoms. But I have reached my limit. I am full of the pomps and vanities, and I return on high. You will see me no more."

“Oh, Letice,” said Betty, obtaining her speech, “you do not grudge me the joys of life?” The fair white being at her side shook her head.

“And you desire no more of the pomps and vanities?”

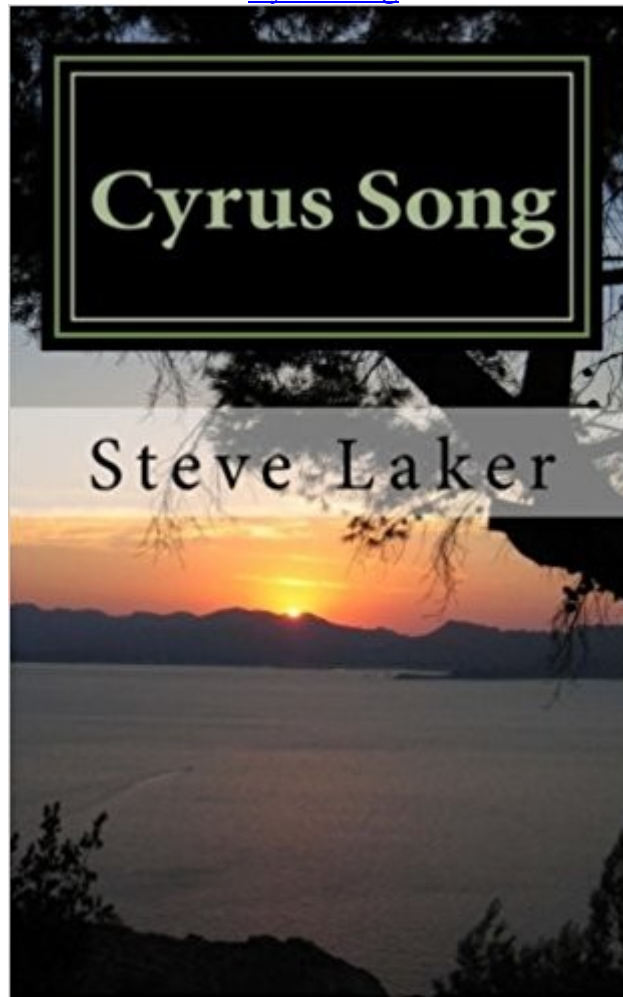
“No, Betty. I have looked through the gates.”

Then Betty put forth her hands to clasp the waist of her sister, as she said fervently— “Tell me, Letice, what you saw beyond.”

“Betty—everything the reverse of Salem Chapel.”

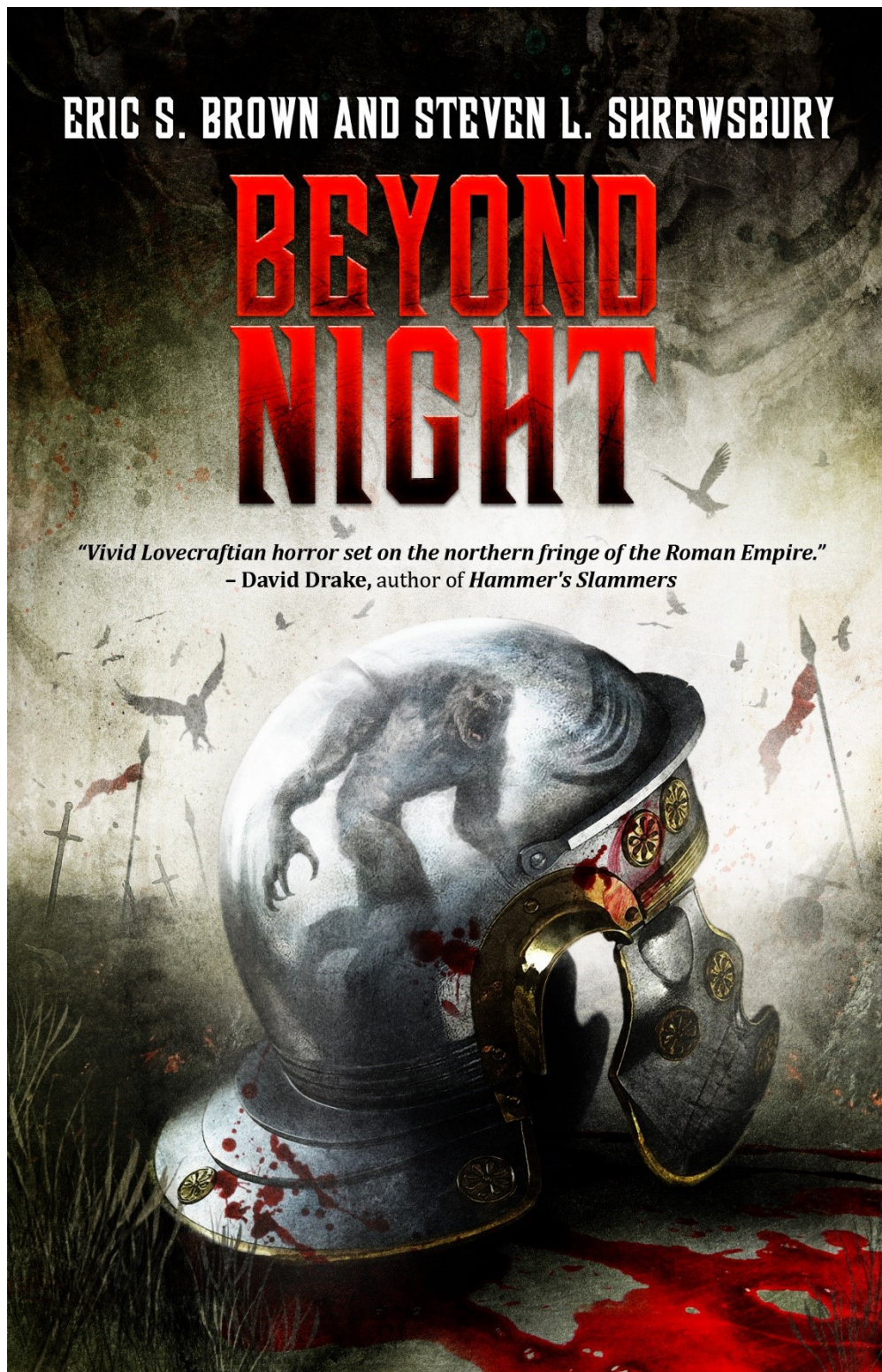
THE END

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REVIEW by John C Adams



*Beyond Night* by Eric S. Brown and Steven L. Shrewsbury

I'm a fan of David Gemmell's heroic fantasy, and I love H P Lovecraft, so when my advance review copy of *Beyond Night* arrived I couldn't wait to dive in.



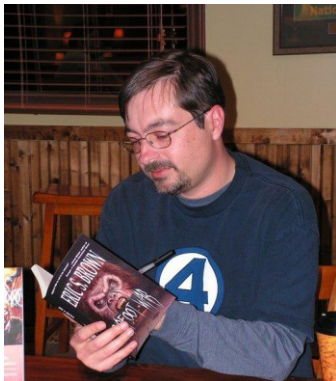
General Malitus leads a Roman Legion up in Caledonia fighting off the Picts and whatever strange forces the local tribes can muster to defend their homeland. With him are Quintus and August, the latter a Roman citizen since the empire invaded his homeland of Germania, and Quintus's brother Ralta.

*Ralta, a tall, hard man, his shoulders wide and his jaw sat firmly as if carved in stone. The skin of his arms stretched tight around the masses of muscles underneath it, while Quintus had the appearance of a pampered scribe. He was thin and much shorter than his brother. Anyone meeting his gaze could see the fierce intellect that dwelt within him. He relied on speed and guile whereas Ralta was nothing short of a powerhouse of brute strength and determination.*

August dreads the faith the Picts place in their own gods, and their willingness to die in service of those deities. However, the soldiers soon have much more than just the war-like Picts to worry about.

*As the formation dissolved, Quintus dove into the path of one of the beasts. His sword slashed fiercely with expert skill. Its blade sliced the throat of a beast towering over him, showering him with its blood, as he laughed madly. There was no berserker rage within Quintus, only the enjoyment of a man who loves dealing death and has a natural talent for it.*

On the fringes of the Pictish lands, a Lovecraftian horror is rising to meet Malitus's Legion, and what has previously been assumed to be attacks by local tribes turns out to be something far more terrifying.



Eric S Brown is the author of numerous book series including the Bigfoot War series, the Kaiju Apocalypse series (with Jason Cordova), the Crypto-Squad series (with Jason Brannon), the Homeworld series (with Tony Faville and Jason Cordova), the Jack Bunny Bam series, and the A Pack of Wolves series.



Stephen Shrewsbury is an established author of hardcore sword & sorcery and horror novels, with twenty published novels under his belt. One of the pleasures of reading this novel lies in the seamless union of their writing.

The arrival of *Britannia* on the screens of Sky Atlantic customers in the New Year and the release of *Beyond Night* by Crystal Lake Publishing two weeks later serve as a timely reminder of the enduring popularity of historical fiction with a good strong horror or fantasy slant to it.

[\*Beyond Night\*](#) is out now from Crystal Lake Publishing.

Enjoy!

THE END

WINTER 2017-18

# Schlock!

## Quarterly

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

**PRETTY PENNY**  
by Kate Lowe

**RED DEMON  
VERSUS THE  
WORM PEOPLE**

BY NEAL PRIVETT

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

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## THE GREY WOLF OF CHICAGO by Garret Schuelke

### Part One

On the Dan Ryan Expressway, a semi truck came to a stopped behind a line of cars.

“Must be an accident up ahead,” said the trucker.

“Dammit,” Gareth Manion, who was in the passenger’s seat, said, “and I’m so close too!”

“Hey now, don’t be in such a hurry, kid.” The trucker took off his hat and relaxed. “Chicago will be there no matter how long this jam lasts.”

Gareth put down the window. He got onto his knees and stuck half of his body out the window.

“HEY!” the trucker yelled. “CUT THAT SHIT OUT!” He pulled Gareth back in by his sweatshirt hood.

“Sorry.” Gareth raked his fingers through his brown hair. “There’s no other route you can go to get to Chicago?”

The trucker glared at him. “No.”

“How about you try driving down the emergency lane?”

The trucker shook his head. “Kid, we’ll get to Chicago soon enough. Chill out, cause you’re really stretching my generosity here.”

“I should have tried hopping a train instead.” Gareth muttered. He grabbed his backpack and opened the door. “Thanks for getting me this far. I’ll walk the rest of the way.”

The trucker laughed. “You got a long walk ahead of ya.”

Gareth smiled. “Yeah, but it’ll be faster if I ran to Chicago.”

The trucker laughed harder, shaking his head. Gareth snapped his fingers, and told the trucker to pay attention. The trucker did so, trying to stop his laughter.

Gareth closed his eyes, and grunted. His hand tightened around his backpack straps. His finger nails grew into claws. The trucker’s eyes widened as Gareth’s hair slowly turned grey.

“WHAT THE FUCK?!” the trucker yelled, straightening himself up.

Gareth opened up the door. “Thanks for the lift!” He got out, put his backpack on, tightened the straps, saluted the trucker, and sped down the side of the expressway.

Give him one more scare, Gareth thought while looking back at the truck. He hopped onto the roof of a nearby car, and continued down Dan Ryan, running on top of cars at an amazing pace. He came to the end of the jam. Law enforcement was directing traffic around the



accident. Gareth leapt over the scene, and dashed down the road, creating a grey blur as he headed towards Chicago.

“It’s just a bandana,” Haruki said, tying it around his boyfriend’s head. “You’re acting like it’s the Gordian Knot.”

Tucker sighed. “Please just hurry up.”

Haruki gave him a light slap. “Don’t be so anxious to get arrested.”

Tucker pulled down the bandana. “We would be having this argument if you would let me wear my normal mask.”

Haruki pulled down his bandana mask. “We’re being resisters right now, not party monsters.”

“We could be both,” Tucker said.

Horns, whistles, and calls to start moving out emitted from Daley Plaza. Haruki leaned in and gave Tucker a quick kiss. “Let’s ride.”

Haruki hopped on his bike. Tucker grabbed Haruki by the hair, turned his head to the side, and kissed him deeply. Cyclists rode by, honking horns and ringing bells.

“What?” Haruki asked.

“You know I just can’t accept weak smooches like that,” Tucker replied.

Haruki grinned while rolling his eyes. He pulled up his bandana mask and took off. Tucker pulled up his mask as well, hopped on his bike, and followed.

Gareth dodged a couple more cars as he made his way through downtown Chicago. He tilted his head up and looked at the skyscrapers.

“Nice,” he said. He ran into a car mirror. He stumbled as the person in the car he hit laid on their horn. “MY BAD!” he yelled, rubbing his arm as he sped down the street.

Maybe I should take a break, Gareth thought. He heard the sounds coming from Daley Plaza, and then saw the crowd. Another person laid on their horn. Gareth saw a truck coming right at him. He jumped, and sailed over the traffic. He stopped himself by grabbing onto a street lamp.

“Whoa!” he said, looking at the large gathering of bicyclists that were heading out into the street.

“HEY!” he heard someone below him yell. “GET DOWN FROM THERE!”

Gareth looked down and saw a bike cop and some bystanders staring at him. “Gotcha, officer,” he said, sliding down the pole. The cop got off his bike and put his hand on his taser. Gareth got halfway down, put both of his feet against the pole, and jumped off.

“PIG!” he yelled, giving the cop the middle finger as he landed, causing nearby onlookers to gasp, and escaped into the street with the bicyclists.

Gareth kept pace with the crowd. A man pulling a giant boom box with a trailer passed him. He heard cars honking, and turned to see some bicyclists spitting on the minivan’s windshield.

“My kinda scene,” Gareth said.

“HEY, GUY!” Haruki yelled. He pulled up next to Gareth. “I’m loving your hair!”

“Thanks!”

“Why did you dye it grey?”

“It’s not dyed—it’s natural!”

“Oh, gosh!” Tucker pulled up. Haruki tapped his arm. “He said his hair is naturally grey!”

Tucker rolled his eyes. “Sure it is.”

Haruki put his hand through Gareth’s hair. “Sorry, being a dick is actually one of his strong points. What’s your name?”

Gareth noticed that Tucker was glaring at him. “You got something to say to me?”

Tucker stood up. “Yeah, why aren’t you on a bike?”

“TUCK!” Haruki yelled.

“I just got here a few minutes ago,” Gareth said. “What is this?”

Tucker sighed. “Critical Mass. It’s for bicyclists only.”

“No, it’s not just for bicyclists,” Haruki said, glaring at Tucker.

“Critical Mass?” Gareth thought it about, and then snapped his fingers. “Oh, I’ve read about this before.”

The bicyclists ahead of them began to yell ‘*LET US PASS!*’

“Police blockade,” Tucker said, smiling. He winked at Haruki. “Be right back.”

Tucker rode off. Gareth looked at Haruki. “Police blockade?”

“Yeah, this happens at every Mass. I apologize for Tucker’s attitude.”

“What’s he got a mad on about?”

“He probably thinks I’m flirting with you—which I’m totally not doing.” Haruki grinned. “I do like silver foxes, though.”

“Well, I’m more a wolf.”

Haruki laughed. “I gotta get up there and watch his back. It was nice meeting you.” Haruki rode off, waving at Gareth.

A roar emitted from the front of the crowd. “There’s no way I’m missing this!” Gareth said, following Haruki.

The cop brandished his baton. “Get that fucking phone out of my face!”

“Chill, man, it’s just my phone,” Tucker said, slowly scanning the blockade. “I’m just downloading a Spotify update, that’s all.”

The cop whacked Tucker’s hand, smashing it on the pavement.

“YOU ASSHOLE!” Tucker yelled, holding his hand. “I’ll sue the fuck out of you for that!”

“Like you would ever win!” the cop said. He swung his baton at Tucker’s head.

Haruki pulled Tucker off his bike. The baton smashed into his arm. The cop moved in and swung again. Gareth caught it before it connected with Haruki’s head.

“Thanks,” Gareth said, yanking the baton out of the cops’ hand, “I always wanted to hold one of these.”

The cop muttered something, and took out his taser. Gareth whacked the taser out of his hand, and poked him in the chest. The cop backed away. Three officers moved in front of him.

“Meh.” Gareth took the baton in both hands and snapped it in half. “I’ve had more fun hitting shitheads with baseball bats.”

“Goddamn,” Tucker said, standing up. Haruki took a hold of his arm and hugged it.

“Superhuman,” the cop growled. The crowd cheered as Gareth tossed the baton pieces into the air and put his hands on his hips. The cop pushed away his fellow officers and got in Gareth’s face. “What’s your name, punk?”

“I’ll tell you mine if you tell us yours.” Gareth pointed at the cop’s badge, which was covered up with a piece of black tape.

The cop growled. “What’re your powers?”

“Fucking up cops.”

“WHAT IS YOUR NAME, FREAK?!”

Gareth grinned. “Niles Standish!”

The cop grabbed Gareth by the throat and lifted him up. Gareth dug his claws into the cop's arm and shredded his skin. He released Gareth, who kicked him the stomach, sending him flying into a squad car.

Everyone became silent. The officers stared at the cop as he lay unconscious against the dented squad car.

“LET’S GO, PIGS!” Gareth yelled, getting into a battle stance that showed off his bloody claws. The crowd went wild. The officers ran towards nearby parked cars and hid behind them, drawing their guns.

“COAST’S CLEAR, FOLKS!” Gareth yelled, waving the bicyclists forward. “GO!”

The crowd proceeded on their route. Many of them bumped fists with Gareth or patted him on the back as they passed.

“You guys cool?” Gareth asked Tucker and Haruki.

“Yeah, man!” Tucker said, smiling. He walked up and hugged Gareth. “I’ve never seen a Chicago cop get owned like that before!”

Haruki leaned in and kissed Gareth on the cheek. “You’re our hero!”

Better than being called a freak, Gareth thought, patting Tucker’s back. “So, where’s this Mass going to?”

Tucker disengaged himself. “Actually, no offense, but you might want to leave—the pigs are probably calling for back up right now.”

Gareth’s eyes widened. “Good point. I’m out of here. Nice meeting you guys.”

Gareth saluted, crouched down, and leapt into the air. He heard Haruki yell ‘WE LIVE IN BRIDGEPORT.’ He landed on the other side of the street, and ran opposite of the bicyclists.

Bridge what, Gareth thought as he ran between the pedestrians. He got past the bicyclists and raced down the middle of the street.

Upton looked at the tree branch that was sitting on the picnic table. He stretched, pushed his dreadlocks back, and stood firm. He cringed as the metallic tentacle came out of his back. He regained his focus, and directed the tentacle towards the branch. He slowly lowered it, and made the tentacle wrap itself around it.

“Yo, Upton,” Sturgill, Upton’s second in command, said, entering the backyard, “got news for you.”

“Let me finish this,” Upton said, slowly reeling the branch towards himself. The tentacle started to jitter. Upton grunted. The tentacle calmed, and he finished retracting it.

“You been getting the hang of it all right?” Sturgill asked.

“It’s been a bitch trying to hold onto things,” Upton dropped the branch into his hand, “but I’m getting better. It still stings when it comes out.”

Sturgill held up a letter. “The Doctor sent you another letter.”

Upton shook his head. “I can’t believe she thinks she can just spam me this shit.” He directed his tentacle towards the letter. He slowly and, as he imagined, gingerly wrapped the tentacle around it. It crumbled. “SHIT!”

“Hey man, metal tentacles can’t be gentle on everything.”

Upton threw the branch aside. “What else is up?” he asked, opening the letter.

“Well, Norman wants to hang with us tomorrow.”

“So, is his crew gonna join up with us again, or what?”

“I’m guessing so. This is probably just one last thing he wants to do before they fully commit.”

Upton nodded as he read the letter. “I’m down. Let’s take him someplace other than this shithole. Got any suggestions?”

Sturgill shrugged. “Entirely up to you, man.” Upton muttered something. “What she say?”

“She wants to do another fucking check-up.” Upton shoved the letter into his back pocket. “She’ll probably try to talk me into going through her ‘mechanization’ thing again too. Fucking annoying.”

Sturgill nodded. “I’ll tell Norman we’re good on the meeting, then.”

He left the backyard. Upton turned around and faced the picnic table. He extended his tentacle into the air, and swung it down as hard as he could. The picnic table smashed in half.

Gareth landed stopped on top of an apartment building. He gave a loud, exaggerated sigh, and slumped his shoulders.

“No sign of them,” he said, taking off his backpack and sitting down on the ledge. “I thought I had this scent thing down pat.”

He looked across Bridgeport. A group of pigeons flew by, followed by a gust of wind.

“Bridgeport is beautiful in the fall,” Gareth said.

The wind died down. His nose tingled. He concentrated, and took in a big whiff.

“Is that them?” Gareth asked, sniffing rapidly. He looked down and saw two bicyclists pull up to the neighbourhood bar. He took another big whiff, and smiled.

“HEY! HEY GUYS!” Gareth yelled. “UP HERE!”

The bicyclists went inside. Gareth muttered “Damn”, put on his backpack, and jumped down to the street. He ran towards the bar, hopping over an incoming car.

“SORRY!” he yelled to the driver, who swerved to a stop, put down his window, and yelled at him. Gareth ignored him and entered Marty’s Packaged Goods and Community Bar.

The scent became overwhelming. Gareth spotted the bicyclists over at the fridge, picking out craft beer.

“Hi, can I help you today?” the clerk across the room asked.

“Nah, I think I found what I’m looking for,” Gareth said.

Haruki perked up. He turned his head around. Gareth grinned, and waved at him.

“YOU!” Haruki yelled. He pushed the beer he selected into Tucker’s arms and ran up and hugged Gareth.

“Nice to see you again, too,” Gareth said, patting Haruki’s back.

“How did you find us?” Tucker said, walking up, glaring.

“You guys said you lived in Bridgeport.”

“Bridgeport’s a big neighbourhood.”

“Tuck!” Haruki said, disengaging the hug.

Tucker adjusted the beer case under one arm. “And you just happened to know we were here?”

Gareth tapped his nose. “I got your scent from earlier. Ax, Old Spice, or whatever crap you sprayed on yourself earlier.

Both Tucker and Haruki’s eyes widened.

“What?” Gareth asked.

“Do that again,” Tucker said.

“Okay, sure.” Gareth tapped his nose again.

“THOSE ACTUALLY ARE CLAWS?!” Tucker yelled.

Gareth grinned. “Yeppers.”

“We were debating what they were,” Haruki grabbed Gareth’s hand and examined his fingers. “You’re definitely coming back with us,” he said, rubbing the claws.

Tucker stiffened. “No, he’s fucking not!”

“Hey, we cool over there guys?” the clerk asked, leaning on the counter with his elbows.

“We’re good!” Haruki said. He clasped Gareth’s hand and turned back to Tucker. “He saved you from getting your head caved in, and I find him fascinating. He should hang with us.”

“I’m down,” Gareth said. “Who are you guys, though?”

Tucker glared. “We don’t even know your name.”

“Okay, I’m Gareth Manion.” He extended his hand. “You’re ‘Tuck’, right?”

“Tucker Fante,” Tucker walked past them and went up to the counter.

“You’re welcome for saving your ass back there,” Gareth muttered.

“I’m Haruki Dazai,” Haruki said. “Give Tucker a sec, he can get pretty defensive.”

Gareth noticed Tucker shaking his head as he put his wallet on the counter and began rifling through his pockets. Gareth fished out a twenty from his wallet. “I got this,” he said, walking up and giving the money to the clerk. “Can we be cool now?” he asked, taking the beer.

Tucker sighed, and nodded his head. “Sure.”

“Follow us!” Haruki said, walking out the door. They unlocked their bikes, waited for the cars to pass, and went off down the street.

“See if you can keep up!” Gareth yelled, running ahead of them.

“But you don’t know the way!” Haruki said.

Gareth slowed down. “I kid, I kid.”

Tucker laughed. They all sped up.

A woman in a hoodie stopped in front of the house and parked her moped. She walked up the stairs. Sturgill stood up from his chair.

“Is he in?” she asked.

“Yeah, he’s chilling,” Sturgill leaned against the pillar. “You’re really gonna give it another shot?”

The woman pulled out the folder from her hoodie pocket. “I forgot to include these in the letter I sent him. I think him actually seeing what I have in mind may get him on board.”

Sturgill grinned, shook his head, and opened the door. “I’ll be rooting for you, Doc.”

“You’re sweet. I should have asked you if you wanted to take part in this instead.”

“I’ll wait and see how Upton turns out.”

She waved at him as she entered the house. Sturgill closed the door behind her. She ignored the gangbangers as they sat on each side of the living room, playing videogames and conversing, and walked up the stairs. She entered Upton’s room, taking care to loudly close the door.

Upton thrashed about and sat up. “SHIT!” He threw his blanket to the side. “Fuck is wrong with you, Mysta?”

Mysta Avon laughed, pulling down her hood. “Sleeping your life away?” she asked, pulling her long, black hair out.

“I was practicing earlier.” Upton sat at the edge of the bed.

Mysta joined him. “Using your tentacle shouldn’t be that exhausting, even for a newcomer.”

“I’ve been going hard.” Upton rubbed his eyes. “I want to get the hang of it ASAP.”

“Well, since I’m here, stand up and I’ll take a look at you.”

Upton sighed, stood up, and lifted his shirt. Mysta examined the metallic circle around his tailbone. She noticed dry blood and bruising.

“How are you handling the pain?” she asked, touching it.

Upton winced. “It stings, but I get used to it—” Mysta poked at it again. “If you don’t fucking poke at it!”

“Good, good.” She circled the bruises with her finger. “Your body will eventually adapt to it. There is a way to—”

“NO.” Upton pulled down his shirt. “I’m still not interested in this ‘mechanization’ process you’ve been touting.”



“That’s why I’m here.” Mysta pulled out the folder and handed it to Upton. “I forgot to include it in the letter.” Upton opened it up and examined the contents. “This explains every aspect of the process, including a new element I added.”

“What ‘element’?”

“It’s fully explained in the folder, but it’s a process that allows flesh to become more fluid—capable of enduring further enhancements than it can now.”

“What’s this supposed to be?” Upton asked, pointing at the drawings.

“That’s how I envision full mechanization to be.”

Upton examined the drawing again. “Looks like a robot.”

Mysta laughed. “No, a robot is mindless and completely obedient,” she stood up. “That’s not what you would be.”

“What *exactly* would I be?” Upton put the folder on his nightstand and glared at her.

“Technically, you’re now cyborgs,” Mysta picked up the folder and took out the drawings. “You’ll become a full-on android if you go through with this process.”

Upton growled. “Like THAT would be any better.”

“You’ll be my first android.” Mysta put her hand on Upton’s shoulder. “We’ll both be making history.”

“Very convincing.” Upton grabbed Mysta by her collar. He threw her out of his room. “Don’t *EVER* come to me with that shit again, or I’ll put a fucking bullet in your head!”

Upton slammed the door. Mysta composed herself, and put her hoodie back up. She went down the stairs. The gangbangers looked at her. She glared at them, opened the door, and slammed it on her way out.

“I’ll check on the subjects later on this week,” she said as she passed by Sturgill. Having become familiar with that tone of her voice, Sturgill rolled his eyes as he watched her get on her moped.

“See ya next week, Doc,” he said as she drove away.

“Wow, you’re REALLY good at this,” Haruki said, as Tucker, their housemate, Lana, and himself watched Gareth take a huge hit from the bong.

Gareth stopped, grinned, tilted his head up, and let out a long plume of smoke. “Yeah, I was a *God* at this back in my hometown.”

“Where are you from?” Lana asked.

Gareth passed the bong to Tucker. “Alpena.”

“Never heard of it.”

“It’s up in Michigan.”

Tucker took a hit and passed the bong to Haruki. “I’ve vacationed a lot in Michigan when I was a kid, but I’ve never heard of Alpena. Is it in the U.P.?”

“It’s the largest city in northeast Michigan.”

“Found it,” Lana said, showing Tucker a map on her phone. She then took a hit from the bong.

“Oh, so it’s across from Traverse City.” Tucker fiddled with the zoom feature. “Yeah, I’ve never heard of it.”

“Figures.” Gareth took another hit. “That’s one of reasons why I left—no one has heard of it, which means nothing comes in, which means there isn’t shit to do.”

“What led you to Chicago?” Haruki asked.

Gareth rolled his eyes. “Family issues, though I’ve been thinking about coming here for a long time.”

They heard the front door slam. “GUYS! I NEED YOUR HELP WITH THE GROCERIES!”

“Mom’s back,” Tucker said, rushing to the entrance.

“You’re all related?” Gareth asked.

Haruki laughed. “No, that’s just what we all call Mary. ‘Den Mother’ is more specific.”

Tucker walked in with Mary, holding groceries with each hand. “Gareth, this is our Mom, Mary. Mom, this is our hero.”

Gareth stood up. “Nice to meet you, ma’am,” he said, wobbling as he extended his hand.

Mary looked at Gareth warily, put her groceries into one arm, and shook Gareth’s hand. She asked what they meant by ‘our hero’. Haruki explained what happened, and Mary perked up.

“Oh, I’ve always wanted to meet a superhuman!” she said. “Well, welcome to our home, Gareth. You sound like you’ll fit right in with us.”

“Wait, I’m moving in?” Gareth asked.

“You totally should,” Haruki said.

“I want you to,” Lana said.

Mary whistled at Tucker. “You guys figure it out. Tuck, I got more groceries in the car”

They watched Mary and Tucker as they exited the house. Haruki and Lana looked back at Gareth with pleading eyes.

“What?” Gareth asked.

“Move in with us,” Haruki said.

“Give into peer pressure,” Lana said.

Gareth hummed. “You guys would be cool with that?” I just rolled into town a few hours ago—”

“We’ll have fun learning about each other,” Haruki said.

“Okay, but I’m pretty sure I have some warrants out on me for attacking that cop.”

Lana laughed. “You think we’re gonna snitch?”

Gareth smiled. “I guess this is my new home now.”

Lana hugged Gareth. Mary and Tucker walked in, arms full of grocery bags. “He’s in!” she said.

“Well, that’s nice to hear,” Mary said. “You’ll have to show me how you dye your hair like that sometime.”

“Oh, it’s not dyed,” Gareth said.

Haruki scratched Gareth’s head. “All natural.”

“Well, kinda,” Gareth grinned. “Somewhat.”

“I’m not following,” Mary said.

Gareth put his finger up. He took a deep breath, and closed his eyes. His hair turned from grey to brown, and his claws shrank into fingernails.

Everyone stared. Gareth opened his eyes and shrugged.

Mary broke the silence. “Cool trick, kid. And now that you’re moving in, I have to go make the ‘initiation’ meal.”

Haruki, Lana, and Tucker moaned. Mary laughed and entered the kitchen.

“What’s up?” Gareth asked.

Lana handed Gareth the bong. “You’re about to find out why she’s called ‘Salt Chunk Mary’.”

“Prepare your asshole,” Tucker said as he entered the kitchen.

Sturgill looked through the peephole. Norman stood on the porch, hands in his pockets, looking around. Sturgill opened the door.

“Norman, my man!” Sturgill and Norman slapped hands and hugged. “Glad you’re back home.”

Norman shook his head. “Fuck man, *I AM* glad to be back in Illinois. Ohio’s a shithole.”

“Just can’t gain any ground there?” Sturgill stepped to the side so Norman could enter the house.

“Not with the resources I got. I don’t even think the place we’re at is worth our time.” Norman looked around the living room. “I thought there would be a lot of you guys hanging around today.”

“Nah, Upton has them out doing errands.”

“Damn, I’m looking forward to seeing everyone again,”

Both of them heard ‘*GET BACK IN THERE!*’ come from the basement.

“Who the hell is that?”

Sturgill shook his head. “That would be Upton.”

A huge crash followed. Sturgill and Norman remained still, listening to the smashing going down below. Norman mouthed ‘*what the fuck?*’

The noise stopped. Sturgill opened the basement door. “Yo, Upton? You alive down there?”

“Somehow I am,” Upton yelled back. “Hold on a sec.”

“Okay, but Norman’s here.”

“SHIT! Okay, I’ll be right up.”

Sturgill closed the door. “Sorry for the hold up.”

“What’s he doing down there?” Norman asked.

“No clue. I’ve been out most of the day. I didn’t even know he was down there.”

Upton emerged. He was covered in blood and had bruising around his neck. He smiled at Norman.

“Hi, you’re Norman, right?” Upton extended his hand. “From our Ohio division?”

Norman stared at him. Sturgill tapped him on his shoulder. “Hey, man.”

Norman glared at him. “I’m not shaking his fucking hand! Look at him!”

Upton looked himself over. “Oh, shit,” he said. He wiped his hands on his jeans and re-presented his hand. Norman continued to glare at him.

Upton put down his hand. “Ready to have some fun later on?” Upton asked, smiling.

Norman looked warily at Sturgill. “Well, I’m here, so I do want to do something.”

“Oh, we got something all right.” Upton took out his wallet and fished out three tickets. “You a Sox fan?”

“Back when I was a kid, yeah.”

“Same here—then I grew up. You into the Cubs?”

Norman relaxed. “Yeah, I dig them.”

“Then check it out.” Upton handed Norman the tickets. “You like those seats?”

Norman’s eyes widened. “Man, you shouldn’t have!” He extended his hand.

“This is the kind of shit I get with my money,” Upton shook Norman’s hand. “You guys chill for a sec. Let me wash up, and we’ll go downtown and get some dinner.

Upton went upstairs. Norman slapped the tickets on his palm.

“I’ve never been that close to Wrigley Field,” Norman said.

“So, we good now?” Sturgill asked.

Norman tensed up. “I’ll stick around, yeah, but no offense, I’m not letting my guard down around that motherfucker.”

Sturgill laughed. “Being in Ohio has made you soft if you’re letting your guard down in the first place.”

The next night, at a bar in Lincoln Park, Lana pushed her way to the front of the stage. She caught her breath, and watched the band perform. A punker came from her left and bashed into her. She hobbled back into the pit. She was hit by two other punkers, and fell to the floor.

Gareth saw her fall out of the corner of his eye. He stopped moshing and made his way towards her. He pushed everyone out of his way, picked her up, put her arm around his shoulders, and forced his way to the bar.

"You're my hero now," Lana said, giving Gareth a peck on his cheek.

"*Fuck*, that's a rough pit!" Gareth said, sitting her on the stool. "I'm having fun, but I was kinda hoping for something with more camaraderie."

"What do you mean?" Lana asked, taking the pick out of her pocket and started fluffing her afro.

"Well, at the shows I would go to, if someone fell, they would get helped back up."

Lana waved her hand. "I'm sure someone would have helped me. You were just faster." She looked around. "Where are the boys?"

Gareth shrugged. The bartender came up to them. Gareth put up two fingers and ordered shots.

Haruki and Tucker came out of the bathroom. Haruki's eyes widened when he saw the dirt on Lana's face.

"Oh, shit! Are you alright?" Haruki asked, taking out a handkerchief and cleaning off her face.

Lana nodded her head. "I'm good, thanks to him."

"She's fine," Gareth said. The shots arrived. "These will help her recover."

Lana shook her head. "No thanks."

"I'll take it, then," Tucker said, sliding behind her. He grabbed one of the shots and drained it. He went for the other one. Gareth grabbed it and gulped it down.

"You seriously want to do this?" Tucker asked.

Gareth burped. "I'll gladly take you on!" He slammed the glass down.

"No, let's hit Boystown," Haruki said, getting between them.

"After this," Tucker replied, looking for the bartender.

"Bitch, we doing this or what?" Gareth said, grinning.

"YES!" Tucker yelled. "BARTENDER!"

"Wow," Lana took out her lipstick, "He's fucking ploughed."

“No, no, you guys,” Haruki said, putting his arms around Tucker and Gareth’s shoulder, drawing them into himself. “We’re getting bored here. We wanna head over to Boystown.”

“But the show’s not over yet!” Gareth said.

“Yeah, but we’re really not into this type of music,” Tucker said. “We just came here because you kept going on about ‘*Oh, I wanna go to a Chicago punk rock show!*’”

“It’s everything I ever expected it to be!” Gareth thought for a sec. “Okay, it’s close to everything I ever expected!”

Haruki’s crossed his arms. “Well, good for you, but we wanna leave. After how things went down this morning, I’m actually surprised you want to do any physical activity.”

Gareth’s mind flashed back to the previous night, where he was initiated into the household by eating Mary’s signature salt pork and beans, which gave him an upset stomach that very morning. “Yeah, let’s not talk about that.” He tapped Lana’s arm. “You’re having a good time, right?”

Lana nodded.

“See, we’re at a stalemate.”

“I’m having fun,” Lana said, “but I’ve been to shows like this hundreds of times, so I’m up for leaving too.”

Gareth muttered ‘shit’. He then had an idea. “Where did you guys say you were going?”

“Boystown,” Haruki said.

“Okay, I’ll meet you guys there after this is done.”

Haruki looked at Lana, who shrugged. “Sure. Do you know where it is?”

Gareth shook his head.

“It’s on Halstead, part of Lakeview.”

“I’ll find you, don’t worry.”

“How?”

Gareth tapped his nose. “The same way I found you yesterday.”

“Oh, bullshit!” Tucker yelled. “You just got lucky yesterday when you were wandering around!”

“Hold still,” Gareth said. He walked up to Tucker and started sniffing him. He lifted up Tucker’s arm and sniffed his armpit. Tucker yanked his arm away.

“Okay, I got your scent. You smell like that shitty cologne my cousin likes to wear when he goes out.”

“Dude, fuck you!”

“I’ll find you,” Gareth put his hands on Tucker’s shoulders and stared deeply into his eyes. “I’ll always find you.”

“Even when you’re drunk as fuck?” Lana asked.

Gareth thought about it for a second. “Yeah, I’m probably good!”

“WHO’S THE ASSHOLE THAT’S BEEN YELLING FOR ME?!” the bartender yelled, coming out of the kitchen.

“THIS GUY!” Gareth yelled, pointing at Tucker.

“We’re going,” Haruki grabbed Tucker. “See you later.”

“Take the Brown line to Belmont,” Lana said, getting up, “you can’t miss it then.”

“Got it,” Gareth gave her a thumbs up. “Later.” He turned back to the bartender. “Another shot, please.”

Gareth drained it. The band began their next song. Gareth burped, grinned, and ran back into the pit. He pushed people away until he made it the stage. He hopped on and started head banging.

“GET OFF THE FUCKING STAGE!” the lead singer said.

Gareth winked at the singer and jumped backwards onto the crown. He yelled ‘YEAH’, and raised his fist as he crowd surfed.

Someone grabbed Gareth by his shoulder and yanked him to the floor. He felt numerous punkers begin to stomp him. He tried rolling away. Someone kicked him in the back, stunning him. The others continued stomping him.

Gareth grabbed two pairs of feet that were coming for his head. He pushed back, sending his attackers into the crowd. He rolled away from another foot, twirled around, and double-kicked the punker in the stomach.

He sprung onto his feet. The crowd backed away. Gareth took off his sweatshirt, tied it around his waist, and transformed. Some of the crowd screamed and ran for the front door. Others became stone-faced and braced themselves. The band stopped and ran for the back door.

Gareth grinned, wiped the blood dripping from his nose, snorted, and swallowed the rest. “COME ON, MOTHERFUCKERS!” Gareth yelled, raising his fists.



One punker attacked. Gareth dodged, and spat in his eye. The punker recoiled, and the others attacked. Gareth punched two of them, and kicked the other in the groin, sending him to his knees and into a ball. He grabbed the punker he spit on by the arm, swung him into the other two, and threw him towards the bar. The punker smashed into the giant mirror behind the counter. The bartender shielded himself with his arm as he phoned the police.

Here's one venue I can probably never come back to, Gareth thought as he surveyed the scene. He sighed, yelled 'SORRY' at the bartender, and ran outside. Everyone was gathered on the sidewalk, huddled into various groups.

"ATTENTION, EVERYONE!" Gareth yelled. The punkers closest to him quickly backed away. Others got out their phones and started recording him. "I NEED TO GET TO 'BELLSTED'. NO, WAIT!" He snapped his fingers. "BELMONT! WHICH WAY TO LAKEVIEW?!"

The punkers pointed to Gareth's left.

"THANKS, HOMIES!" Gareth yelled. He waved, and sped down the street.

The punkers talked frantically amongst themselves. They stopped recording, and began uploading their videos and pictures onto their social media accounts.

"That game was a blowout," Sturgill said as he, Norman, and Upton walked down Halsted.

"Yeah, it's been awhile since the Cubs won like that," Upton said. He elbowed Norman. "You have fun, Norm?"

Norman readjusted his new Cubs hat. "Hell yeah! That was almost better than a Blackhawks game!"

"But not as bad as a Bears game, right?" Sturgill asked.

They broke out into laughter. Sturgill slapped Upton on the back. Upton stopped and stiffened as pain shot through him.

"Shit!" he mumbled, bending over and relaxing. The pain faded.

"You cool, man?" Sturgill asked.

Upton shook his head. "Never had that happen," he said, straightening up. He looked to his left and saw an alley. "Come on, I gotta check something out."

They walked to the end of the alley. "What's up with you?" Norman asked.

Upton grunted, and his tentacle popped out from under his shirt. "My tentacle hurts," he said, grabbing it with both hands and examining it.

“Maybe you used it too much during the game?” Sturgill said. “Or when you were practicing earlier?”

Upton shook his head. “Yeah, maybe I overdid it.”

“What were you doing with it?” Norman asked. “Picking pockets?”

Upton snorted. He turned the tentacle end towards Norman. The metal covering shuttered open, revealing a lens.

“It’s a camera,” Upton said. “The Doc wanted to try it out, and I actually thought it would be a good idea.”

“Oh, so you can see and record shit with you mind?”

Upton gave Norman a puzzled look.

“What?”

“Fuck you talking about?” Upton took out his glasses. “I use these to see through the camera, stupid.”

“Oh, okay,” Norman laughed. “That’s why you were wearing that geeky ass shit.”

Upton handed him the glasses. “Try them on.”

Norman put on the glasses. Upton activated the camera. Norman saw himself from an upward angle.

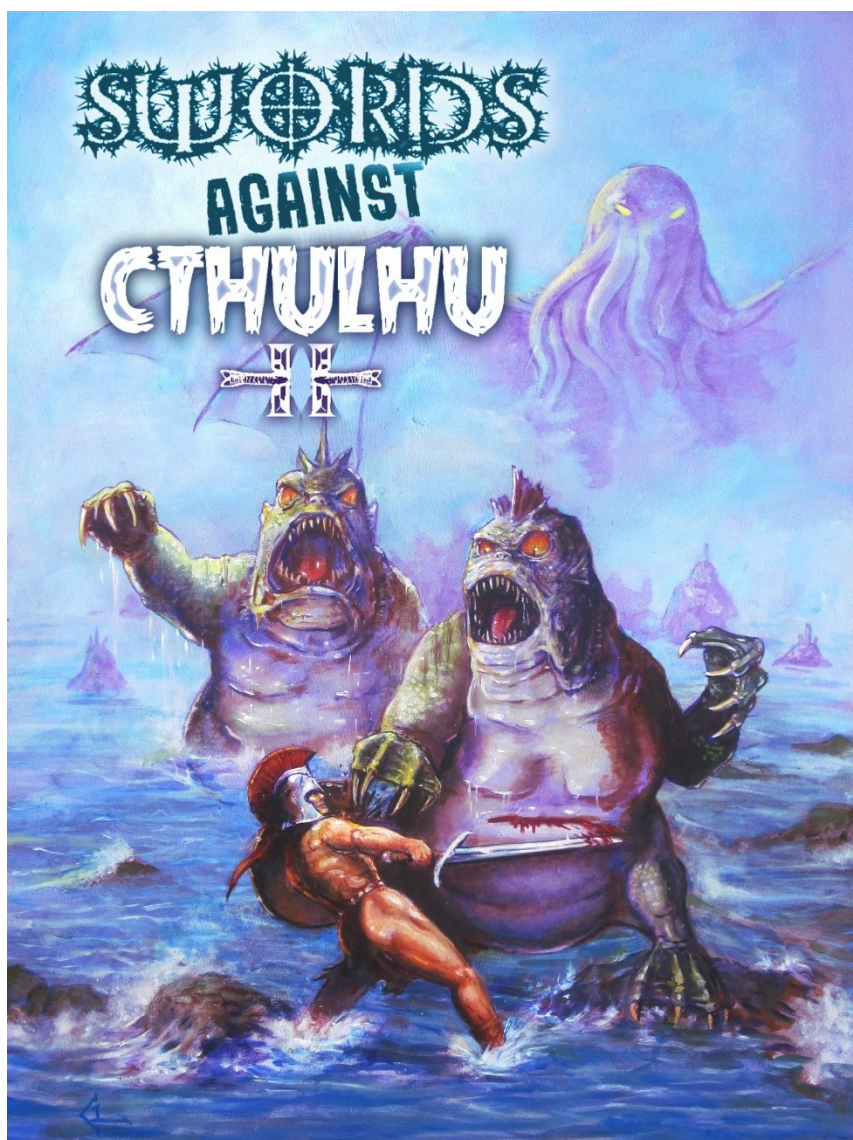
“Nice,” Norman threw up gang signs. “How far can this thing go?”

“You mean, ‘extend’?” Sturgill asked.

“Whatever, man, just show me what you were doing during the game.”

“You got it, Blackhawks,” Upton said, dropping his tentacle to the ground and allowing it to move down the alley.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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Chapter III —The Untravelled Deep

Rising at 5h., I observed a drooping in the leaves of my garden, and especially of the larger shrubs and plants, for which I was not wholly unprepared, but which might entail some inconvenience if, failing altogether, they should cease to absorb the gases generated from buried waste, to consume which they had been planted. Besides this, I should, of course, lose the opportunity of transplanting them to Mars, though I had more hope of acclimatising seedlings raised from the seed I carried with me than plants which had actually begun their life on the surface of the Earth. The failure I ascribed naturally to the known connection between the action of gravity and the circulation of the sap; though, as I had experienced no analogous inconvenience in my own person, I had hoped that this would not seriously affect vegetation. I was afraid to try the effect of more liberal watering, the more so that already the congelation of moisture upon the glasses from the internal air, dry as the latter had been kept, was a sensible annoyance—an annoyance which would have become an insuperable trouble had I not taken so much pains, by directing the thermic currents upon the walls, to keep the internal temperature, in so far as comfort would permit—it had now fallen to 4° C.—as near as possible to that of the inner surface of the walls and windows. A careful use of the thermometer indicated that the metallic surface of the former was now nearly zero C., or 32° F. The inner surface of the windows was somewhat colder, showing that the crystal was more pervious to heat than the walls, with their greater thickness, their outer and inner lining of metal, and massive interior of concrete. I directed a current from the thermogene upon either division of the garden, hoping thus to protect the plants from whatever injury they might receive from the cold. Somewhat later, perceiving that the drooping still continued, I resolved upon another experiment, and arranging an apparatus of copper wire beneath the soil, so as to bring the extremities in immediate contact with their roots, I directed through these wires a prolonged feeble current of electricity; by which, as I had hoped rather than expected, the plants were after a time materially benefited, and to which I believe I owed it that they had not all perished long before the termination of my voyage.

It would be mere waste of space and time were I to attempt anything like a journal of the weeks I spent in the solitude of this artificial planet. As matter of course, the monotony of a voyage through space is in general greater than that of a voyage across an ocean like the Atlantic, where no islands and few ships are to be encountered. It was necessary to be very frequently, if not constantly, on the look-out for possible incidents of interest in a journey so utterly novel through regions which the telescope can but imperfectly explore. It was difficult, therefore, to sit down to a book, or even to pursue any necessary occupation unconnected with the actual conduct of the vessel, with uninterrupted attention. My eyes, the only sense organs I could employ, were constantly on the alert; but, of course, by far the greater portion of my time passed without a single new object or occasion of remark. That a journey so utterly without precedent or parallel, in which so little could be anticipated or provided for, through regions absolutely untraversed and very nearly unknown, should be monotonous, may seem strange. But in truth the novelties of the situation, such as they were, though intensely striking and interesting, were each in turn speedily examined, realised, and, so to speak, exhausted; and this once done, there was no greater occupation to the mind in the continuance of strange than in that of familiar scenery. The infinitude of surrounding blackness, filled as it were with points of light more or less brilliant, when once its effects had been scrutinised, and when nothing more remained to be noted, afforded certainly a more agreeable, but scarcely a more interesting or absorbing, outlook than the dead grey circle of

sea, the dead grey hemisphere of cloud, which form the prospect from the deck of a packet in mid-Atlantic; while of change without or incident in the vessel herself there was, of course, infinitely less than is afforded in an ocean voyage by the variations of weather, not to mention the solace of human society. Everything around me, except in the one direction in which the Earth's disc still obscured the Sun, remained unchanged for hours and days; and the management of my machinery required no more than an occasional observation of my instruments and a change in the position of the helm, which occupied but a few minutes some half-dozen times in the twenty-four hours. There was not even the change of night and day, of sun and stars, of cloud or clear sky. Were I to describe the manner in which each day's leisure was spent, I should bore my readers even more than—they will perhaps be surprised by the confession—I was bored myself.

My sleep was of necessity more or less broken. I wished to have eight hours of rest, since, though seven of continuous sleep might well have sufficed me, even if my brain had been less quiet and unexcited during the rest of the twenty-four, it was impossible for me to enjoy that term of unbroken slumber. I therefore decided to divide my sleep into two portions of rather more than four hours each, to be taken as a rule after noon and after midnight; or rather, since noon and midnight had no meaning for me, from 12h. to 16h. and from 24h. to 4h. But of course sleep and everything else, except the necessary management of the machine, must give way to the chances of observation; it would be better to remain awake for forty-eight hours at a stretch than to miss any important phenomenon the period of whose occurrence could be even remotely calculated.

At 8h., I employed for the first time the apparatus which I may call my window telescope, to observe, from a position free from the difficulties inflicted on terrestrial astronomers by the atmosphere, all the celestial objects within my survey. As I had anticipated, the absence of atmospheric disturbance and diffusion of light was of extreme advantage. In the first place, I ascertained by the barycrite and the discometer my distance from the Earth, which appeared to be about 120 terrestrial radii. The light of the halo was of course very much narrower than when I first observed it, and its scintillations or coruscations no longer distinctly visible. The Moon presented an exquisitely fine thread of light, but no new object of interest on the very small portion of her daylight hemisphere turned towards me. Mars was somewhat difficult to observe, being too near what may be called my zenith. But the markings were far more distinct than they appear, with greater magnifying powers than I employed, upon the Earth. In truth, I should say that the various disadvantages due to the atmosphere deprive the astronomer of at least one-half of the available light-collecting power of his telescope, and consequently of the defining power of the eye-piece; that with a 200 glass he sees less than a power of 100 reveals to an eye situated in space; though, from the nature of the lens through which I looked, I cannot speak with certainty upon this point. With a magnifying power of 300 the polar spots of Mars were distinctly visible and perfectly defined. They were, I thought, less white than they appeared from the Earth, but their colour was notably different from that of the planet's general surface, differing almost as widely from the orange hue of what I supposed to be land as from the greyish blue of the water. The orange was, I thought, deeper than it appears through a telescope of similar power on Earth. The seas were distinctly grey rather than blue, especially when, by covering the greater part of the field, I contrived for a moment to observe a sea alone, thus eliminating the effect of contrast. The bands of Jupiter in their turn were more notably distinct; their variety of colour as well as the contrast of light and shade much more definite, and their irregularities more unmistakable. A satellite was approaching the disc, and this afforded me an opportunity of realising with especial clearness the difference between observation through seventy or a hundred miles of terrestrial

atmosphere outside the object glass and observation in space. The two discs were perfectly rounded and separately discernible until they touched. Moreover, I was able to distinguish upon one of the darker bands the disc of the satellite itself, while upon a lighter band its round black shadow was at the same time perfectly defined. This wonderfully clear presentation of one of the most interesting of astronomical phenomena so absorbed my attention that I watched the satellite and shadow during their whole course, though the former, passing after a time on to a light band, became comparatively indistinct. The moment, however, that the outer edge passed off the disc of Jupiter, its outline became perfectly visible against the black background of sky. What was still more novel was the occultation for some little time of a star, apparently of the tenth magnitude, not by the planet but by the satellite, almost immediately after it passed off the disc of the former. Whether the star actually disappeared at once, as if instantaneously extinguished, or whether, as I thought at the moment, it remained for some tenth of a second partially visible, as if refracted by an atmosphere belonging to the satellite, I will not venture to say. The bands and rings of Saturn, the division between the two latter, and the seven satellites, were also perfectly visible, with a distinctness that a much greater magnifying power would hardly have attained under terrestrial conditions. I was perplexed by two peculiarities, not, so far as I know, hitherto [5] mentioned by astronomers. The circumference did not appear to present an even curvature.

I mean that, apart from the polar compression, the shape seemed as if the spheroid were irregularly squeezed; so that though not broken by projection or indentation, the limb did not present the regular quasi-circular curvature exhibited in the focus of our telescopes. Also, between the inner ring and the planet, with a power of 500, I discerned what appeared to be a dark purplish ring, semi-transparent, so that through it the bright surface of Saturn might be discerned as through a veil. Mercury shone brightly several degrees outside the halo surrounding the Earth's black disc; and Venus was also visible; but in neither case did my observations allow me to ascertain anything that has not been already noted by astronomers. The dim form of Uranus was better defined than I had previously seen it, but no marking of any kind was perceptible.

Rising from my second, or, so to speak, midday rest, and having busied myself for some little time with what I may call my household and garden duties, I observed the discometer at 1h. (or 5 P.M.). It indicated about two hundred terrestrial radii of elevation. I had, of course, from the first been falling slightly behind the Earth in her orbital motion, and was no longer exactly in opposition; that is to say, a line drawn from the Astronaut to the Earth's centre was no longer a prolongation of that joining the centres of the Earth and Sun. The effect of this divergence was now perceptible. The earthly corona was unequal in width, and to the westward was very distinctly brightened, while on the other side it was narrow and comparatively faint. While watching this phenomenon through the lower lens, I thought that I could perceive behind or through the widest portion of the halo a white light, which at first I mistook for one of those scintillations that had of late become scarcely discernible. But after a time it extended visibly beyond the boundary of the halo itself, and I perceived that the edge of the Sun's disc had come at last into view. It was but a minute and narrow crescent, but was well worth watching. The brightening and broadening of the halo at this point I perceived to be due, not to the Sun's effect upon the atmosphere that produced it, but chiefly to the twilight now brightening on that limb of the Earth's disc; or rather to the fact that a small portion of that part of the Earth's surface, where, if the Sun were not visible, he was but a very little below the horizon, had been turned towards me. I saw through the telescope first a tiny solar crescent of intense brightness, then the halo proper, now exceedingly narrow, and then what looked like a silver terrestrial crescent, but a mere thread, finer and shorter than

any that the Moon ever displays even to telescopic observers on Earth; since, when such a minute portion of her illuminated surface is turned towards the Earth, it is utterly extinguished to our eyes by the immediate vicinity of the Sun, as was soon the case with the terrestrial crescent in question. I watched long and with intense interest the gradual change, but I was called away from it by a consideration of no little practical moment. I must now be moving at a rate of nearly, if not quite, 40,000 miles an hour, or about a million miles per diem. It was not my intention, for reasons I shall presently explain, ever greatly to exceed this rate; and if I meant to limit myself to a fixed rate of speed, it was time to diminish the force of the aperioc current, as otherwise before its reduction could take effect I should have attained an impulse greater than I desired, and which could not be conveniently or easily diminished when once reached. Quitting, therefore, though reluctantly, my observation of the phenomena below me, I turned to the aperioc, and was occupied for some two or three hours in gradually reducing the force as measured by the cratometer attached to the downward conductor, and measuring with extreme care the very minute effect produced upon the barycrite and the discometer. Even the difference between 200 and 201 radii of elevation or apogaic distance was not easily perceptible on either. It took, of course, much more minute observation and a much longer time to test the effect produced by the regulation of the movement, since whether I travelled forty, forty-five, or forty-two thousand miles in the course of one hour made scarcely any difference in the diameter of the Earth's disc, still less, for reasons above given, in the gravity. By midnight, however, I was satisfied that I had not attained quite 1,000,000 miles, or 275 terrestrial radii; also that my speed was not greater than 45,000 miles ( $11\frac{1}{4}$  radii) per hour, and was not, I thought, increasing. Of this last point, however, I could better satisfy myself at the end of my four hours' rest, to which I now betook myself.

I woke about 4h. 30m., and on a scrutiny of the instruments, felt satisfied that I was not far out in my calculations. A later hour, however, would afford a more absolute certainty. I was about to turn again to the interesting work of observation through the lens in the floor, when my attention was diverted by the sight of something like a whitish cloud visible through the upper window on my left hand. Examined by the telescope, its widest diameter might be at most ten degrees. It was faintly luminous, presenting an appearance very closely resembling that of a star cluster or nebula just beyond the power of resolution. As in many nebulae, there was a visible concentration in one part; but this did not occupy the centre, but a position more resembling that of the nucleus of a small tailless comet. The cloudlet might be a distant comet, it might be a less distant body of meteors clustering densely in some particular part of their orbit; and, unfortunately, I was not likely to solve the problem. Gradually the nebula changed its position, but not its form, seeming to move downwards and towards the stern of my vessel, as if I were passing it without approaching nearer. By the time that I was satisfied of this, hunger and even faintness warned me that I must not delay preparing my breakfast. When I had finished this meal and fulfilled some necessary tasks, practical and arithmetical, the hand of the chronometer indicated the eighth hour of my third day. I turned again somewhat eagerly to the discometer, which showed an apparent distance of 360 terrestrial radii, and consequently a movement which had not materially varied from the rate of  $11\frac{1}{4}$  radii per hour. By this time the diameter of the Earth was not larger in appearance than about 19', less than two-thirds that of the Sun; and she consequently appeared as a black disc covering somewhat more than one-third of his entire surface, but by no means concentric. The halo had of course completely disappeared; but with the vernier it was possible to discern a narrow band or line of hazy grey around the black limb of the planet. She was moving, as seen from the Astronaut, very slightly to the north, and more decidedly, though very slowly, to the eastward; the one motion due to my deliberately chosen direction in space, the other to

the fact that as my orbit enlarged I was falling, though as yet slowly, behind her. The sun now shone through, the various windows, and, reflected from the walls, maintained a continuous daylight within the Astronaut, as well diffused as by the atmosphere of Earth, strangely contrasting the star-spangled darkness outside.

At the beginning as at the end of my voyage, I steered a distinct course, governed by considerations quite different from those which controlled the main direction of my voyage. Thus far I had simply risen straight from the Earth in a direction somewhat to the southward, but on the whole "in opposition," or right away from the Sun. So, at the conclusion of my journey, I should have to devote some days to a gradual descent upon Mars, exactly reversing the process of my ascent from the Earth. But between these two periods I had comparatively little to do with either planet, my course being governed by the Sun, and its direction and rate being uniform. I wished to reach Mars at the moment of opposition, and during the whole of the journey to keep the Earth between myself and the Sun, for a reason which may not at first be obvious. The moment of opposition is not necessarily that at which Mars is nearest to the Earth, but is sufficiently so for practical calculation. At that moment, according to the received measurement of planetary distances, the two would be more than 40 millions of miles apart. In the meantime the Earth, travelling on an interior or smaller orbit, and also at a greater absolute speed, was gaining on Mars. The Astronaut, moving at the Earth's rate under an impulse derived from the Earth's revolution round the Sun (that due to her rotation on her own axis having been got rid of, as aforesaid), traveller in an orbit constantly widening, so that, while gaining on Mars, I gained on him less than did the Earth, and was falling behind her. Had I used the apery only to drive me directly outward from the Sun, I should move under the impulse derived from the Earth about 1,600,000 miles a day, or 72 millions of miles in forty-five days, in the direction common to the two planets. The effect of the constantly widening orbit would be much as if the whole motion took place on one midway between those of the Earth and Mars, say 120 millions of miles from the Sun. The arc described on this orbit would be equivalent to 86 millions of miles on that of Mars. The entire arc of his orbit between the point opposite to that occupied by the Earth when I started and the point of opposition—the entire distance I had to gain as measured along his path—was about 116 millions of miles; so that, trusting to the terrestrial impulse alone, I should be some 30 millions behindhand at the critical moment. The apery force must make up for this loss of ground, while driving me in a direction, so to speak, at right angles with that of the orbit, or along its radius, straight outward from the Sun, forty odd millions of miles in the same time. If I succeeded in this, I should reach the orbit of Mars at the point and at the moment of opposition, and should attain Mars himself. But in this I might fail, and I should then find myself under the sole influence of the Sun's attraction; able indeed to resist it, able gradually to steer in any direction away from it, but hardly able to overtake a planet that should lie far out of my line of advance or retreat, while moving at full speed away from me. In order to secure a chance of retreat, it was desirable as long as possible to keep the Earth between the Astronaut and the Sun; while steering for that point in space where Mars would lie at the moment when, as seen from the centre of the Earth, he would be most nearly opposite the Sun, —would cross the meridian at midnight. It was by these considerations that the course I henceforward steered was determined. By a very simple calculation, based on the familiar principle of the parallelogram of forces, I gave to the apery current a force and direction equivalent to a daily motion of about 750,000 miles in the orbital, and rather more than a million in the radial line. I need hardly observe that it would not be to the apery current alone, but to a combination of that current with the orbital impulse received at first from the Earth, that my progress and course would be due. The latter was the stronger influence; the former only was under my control, but it would suffice to determine, as I might from time to



time desire, the resultant of the combination. The only obvious risk of failure lay in the chance that, my calculations failing or being upset, I might reach the desired point too soon or too late. In either case, I should be dangerously far from Mars, beyond his orbit or within it, at the time when I should come into a line with him and the Sun; or, again, putting the same mischance in another form, behind him or before him when I attained his orbit. But I trusted to daily observation of his position, and verification of my "dead reckoning" thereby, to find out any such danger in time to avert it.

The displacement of the Earth on the Sun's face proved it to be necessary that the apergic current should be directed against the latter in order to govern my course as I desired, and to recover the ground I had lost in respect to the orbital motion. I hoped for a moment that this change in the action of the force would settle a problem we had never been able to determine. Our experiments proved that apergy acts in a straight line when once collected in and directed along a conductor, and does not radiate, like other forces, from a centre in all directions. It is of course this radiation—diffusing the effect of light, heat, or gravity over the surface of a sphere, which surface is proportionate to the square of the radius—that causes these forces to operate with an energy inversely proportionate, not to the distance, but to its square. We had no reason to think that apergy, exempt as it is from this law, would be at all diminished by distance; and this view the rate of acceleration as I rose from the Earth had confirmed, and my entire experience has satisfied me that it is correct. None of our experiments, however, had indicated, or could well indicate, at what rate this force can travel through space; nor had I yet obtained any light upon this point. From the very first the current had been continuous, the only interruption taking place when I was not five hundred miles from the Earth's surface. Over so small a distance as that, the force would move so instantaneously that no trace of the interruption would be perceptible in the motion of the Astronaut. Even now the total interruption of the action of apergy for a considerable time would not affect the rate at which I was already moving. It was possible, however, that if the current had been hitherto wholly intercepted by the Earth, it might take so long a time in reaching the Sun that the interval between the movement of the helm and the response of the Astronaut's course thereto might afford some indication of the time occupied by the current in traversing the 96-1/2 millions of miles which parted me from the Sun. My hope, however, was wholly disappointed. I could neither be sure that the action was instantaneous, nor that it was otherwise.

At the close of the third day I had gained, as was indicated by the instruments, something more than two millions of miles in a direct line from the Sun; and for the future I might, and did, reckon on a steady progress of about one and a quarter million miles daily under the apergic force alone—a gain in a line directly outward from the Sun of about one million. Henceforward I shall not record my observations, except where they implied an unexpected or altered result.

On the sixth day, I perceived another nebula, and on this occasion in a more promising direction. It appeared, from its gradual movement, to lie almost exactly in my course, so that if it were what I suspected, and were not at any great distance from me, I must pass either near or through it, and it would surely explain what had perplexed and baffled me in the case of the former nebula. At this distance the nature of the cloudlet was imperceptible to the naked eye. The window telescope was not adjustable to an object which I could not bring conveniently within the field of view of the lenses. In a few hours the nebula so changed its form and position, that, being immediately over the portion of the roof between the front or bow lens and that in the centre of the roof, its central section was invisible; but the extremities of that part which I had seen in the first instance through the upper plane window

of the bow were now clearly visible from the upper windows of either side. What had at first been a mere greatly elongated oval, with a species of rapidly diminishing tail at each extremity, had now become an arc spanning no inconsiderable part of the space above me, narrowing rapidly as it extended downwards and sternwards. Presently it came in view through the upper lens, but did not obscure in the least the image of the stars which were then visible in the metacompass. I very soon ascertained that the cloudlet consisted, as I had supposed in the former case, of a multitude of points of light less brilliant than the stars, the distance between which became constantly wider, but which for some time were separately so small as to present no disc that any magnifying power at my command could render measurable. In the meantime, the extremities visible through the other windows were constantly widening out till lost in the spangled darkness. By and by, it became impossible with the naked eye to distinguish the individual points from the smaller stars; and shortly after this the nearest began to present discs of appreciable size but somewhat irregular shape. I had now no doubt that I was about to pass through one of those meteoric rings which our most advanced astronomers believe to exist in immense numbers throughout space, and to the Earth's contact with or approach to which they ascribe the showers of falling stars visible in August and November. Ere long, one after another of these bodies passed rapidly before my sight, at distances varying probably from five yards to five thousand miles. Where to test the distance was impossible, anything like accurate measurement was equally out of the question; but my opinion is, that the diameters of the nearest ranged from ten inches to two hundred feet. One only passed so near that its absolute size could be judged by the marks upon its face. This was a rock-like mass, presenting at many places on the surface distinct traces of metallic veins or blotches, rudely ovoid in form, but with a number of broken surfaces, one or two of which reflected the light much more brilliantly than others. The weight of this one meteoroid was too insignificant as compared with that of the Astronaut seriously to disturb my course. Fortunately for me, I passed so nearly through the centre of the aggregation that its attraction as a whole was nearly inoperative. So far as I could judge, the meteors in that part of the ring through which I passed were pretty evenly distributed; and as from the appearance of the first which passed my window to the disappearance of the last four hours elapsed, I conceived that the diameter of the congeries, measured in the direction of my path, which seemed to be nearly in the diameter of their orbit, was about 180,000 miles, and probably the perpendicular depth was about the same.

I may mention here, though somewhat out of place, to avoid interrupting the narrative of my descent upon Mars, the only interesting incident that occurred during the latter days of my journey—the gradual passage of the Earth off the face of the Sun. For some little time after this the Earth was entirely invisible; but later, looking through the telescope adjusted to the lens on that side, I discerned two very minute and bright crescents, which, from their direction and position, were certainly those of the Earth and Moon, indeed could hardly be anything else.

Towards the thirtieth day of my voyage I was disturbed by the conflicting indications obtained from different instruments and separate observations. The general result came to this, that the discometer, where it should have indicated a distance of 333, actually gave 347. But if my speed had increased, or I had overestimated the loss by changes of direction, Mars should have been larger in equal proportion. This, however, was not the case. Supposing my reckoning to be right, and I had no reason to think it otherwise, except the indication of the discometer, the Sun's disc ought to have diminished in the proportion of 95 to 15, whereas the diminution was in the proportion of 9 to 1. So far as the barycrite could be trusted, its very minute indications confirmed those of the discometer; and the only conclusion I could

draw, after much thought and many intricate calculations, was that the distance of 95 millions of miles between the Earth and the Sun, accepted, though not very confidently, by all terrestrial astronomers, is an over-estimate; and that, consequently, all the other distances of the solar system have been equally overrated. Mars consequently would be smaller, but also his distance considerably less, than I had supposed. I finally concluded that the solar distance of the Earth was less than 9 millions of miles, instead of more than 95. This would involve, of course, a proportionate diminution in the distance I had to traverse, while it did not imply an equal error in the reckoning of my speed, which had at first been calculated from the Earth's disc, and not from that of the Sun. Hence, continuing my course unchanged, I should arrive at the orbit of Mars some days earlier than intended, and at a point behind that occupied by the planet, and yet farther behind the one I aimed at. Prolonged observation and careful calculation had so fully satisfied me of the necessity of the corrections in question, that I did not hesitate to alter my course accordingly, and to prepare for a descent on the thirty-ninth instead of the forty-first day. I had, of course, to prepare for the descent very long before I should come within the direct influence of the attraction of Mars. This would not prevail over the Sun's attraction till I had come within a little more than 100,000 miles of the surface, and this distance would not allow for material reduction of my speed, even were I at once to direct the whole force of the aperiatic current against the planet. I estimated that arriving within some two millions of miles of him, with a speed of 45,000 miles per hour, and then directing the whole force of the current in his direction, I should arrive at his surface at a speed nearly equal to that at which I had ascended from the Earth. I knew that I could spare force enough to make up for any miscalculation possible, or at least probable. Of course any serious error might be fatal. I was exposed to two dangers; perhaps to three: but to none which I had not fully estimated before even preparing for my voyage. If I should fail to come near enough to the goal of my journey, and yet should go on into space, or if, on the other hand, I should stop short, the Astronaut might become an independent planet, pursuing an orbit nearly parallel to that of the Earth; in which case I should perish of starvation. It was conceivable that I might, in attempting to avert this fate, fall upon the Sun, though this seemed exceedingly improbable, requiring a combination of accidents very unlikely to occur. On the other hand, I might by possibility attain my point, and yet, failing properly to calculate the rate of descent, be dashed to pieces upon the surface of Mars. Of this, however, I had very little fear, the tremendous power of the apery having been so fully proved that I believed that nothing but some disabling accident to myself—such as was hardly to be feared in the absence of gravitation, and with the extreme simplicity of the machinery I employed—could prevent my being able, when I became aware of the danger, to employ in time a sufficient force to avert it. The first of these perils, then, was the graver one, perhaps the only grave one, and certainly to my imagination it was much the most terrible. The idea of perishing of want in the infinite solitude of space, and being whirled round for ever the dead denizen of a planet one hundred feet in diameter, had in it something even more awful than grotesque.

On the thirty-ninth morning of my voyage, so far as I could calculate by the respective direction and size of the Sun and of Mars, I was within about 1,900,000 miles from the latter. I proceeded without hesitation to direct the whole force of the current permitted to emerge from the apery directly against the centre of the planet. His diameter increased with great rapidity, till at the end of the first day I found myself within one million of miles of his surface. His diameter subtended about 15', and his disc appeared about one-fourth the size of the Moon. Examined through the telescope, it presented a very different appearance from that either of the Earth or of her satellite. It resembled the former in having unmistakably air and water. But, unlike the Earth, the greater portion of its surface seemed to be land; and, instead of continents surrounded by water, it presented a number of separate seas, nearly all of them

land-locked. Around the snow-cap of each pole was a belt of water; around this, again, a broader belt of continuous land; and outside this, forming the northern and southern boundary between the arctic and temperate zones, was another broader band of water, connected apparently in one or two places with the central, or, if one may so call it, equatorial sea. South of the latter is the one great Martial ocean. The most striking feature of this new world, as seen from this point, was the existence of three enormous gulfs, from three to five thousand miles in length, and apparently varying in breadth from one hundred to seven hundred miles. In the midst of the principal ocean, but somewhat to the southward, is an island of unique appearance. It is roughly circular, and, as I perceived in descending, stands very high, its table-like summit being some 4000 feet, as I subsequently ascertained, above the sea-level. Its surface, however, was perfectly white—scarcely less brilliant, consequently, than an equal area of the polar icefields. The globe, of course, revolved in some 4-1/2 hours of earthly time, and, as I descended, presented successively every part of its surface to my view. I speak of descent, but, of course, I was as yet ascending just as truly as ever, the Sun being visible through the lens in the floor, and reflected upon the mirror of the discometer, while Mars was now seen through the upper lens, and his image received in the mirror of the metacompass. A noteworthy feature in the meteorology of the planet became apparent during the second day of the descent. As magnified by the telescope adjusted to the upper lens, the distinctions of sea and land disappeared from the eastern and western limbs of the planet; indeed, within 15° or an hour of time from either. It was plain, therefore, that those regions in which it was late evening or early morning were hidden from view; and, independently of the whitish light reflected from them, there could be little doubt that the obscuration was due to clouds or mists. Had the whitish light covered the land alone, it might have been attributed to a snowfall, or, perhaps, even to a very severe hoar frost congealing a dense moisture. But this last seemed highly improbable; and that mist or cloud was the true explanation became more and more apparent as, with a nearer approach, it became possible to discern dimly a broad expanse of water contrasting the orange tinge of the land through this annular veil. At 4h. on the second day of the descent, I was about 500,000 miles from Mars, the micrometer verifying, by the increased angle subtended by the diameter, my calculated rate of approach. On the next day I was able to sleep in security, and to devote my attention to the observation of the planet's surface, for at its close I should be still 15,000 miles from Mars, and consequently beyond the distance at which his attraction would predominate over that of the Sun. To my great surprise, in the course of this day I discerned two small discs, one on each side of the planet, moving at a rate which rendered measurement impossible, but evidently very much smaller than any satellite with which astronomers are acquainted, and so small that their non-discovery by terrestrial telescopes was not extraordinary. They were evidently very minute, whether ten, twenty, or fifty miles in diameter I could not say; neither of them being likely, so far as I could calculate, to come at any part of my descent very near the Astronaut, and the rapidity of their movement carrying them across the field, even with the lowest power of my telescopes, too fast for measurement. That they were Martial moons, however, there could be no doubt.

About 10h. on the last day of the descent, the effect of Mars' attraction, which had for some time so disturbed the position of the Astronaut as to take his disc completely out of the field of the meta-compass, became decidedly predominant over that of the Sun. I had to change the direction of the aperiic current first to the left-hand conductor, and afterwards, as the greater weight of the floor turned the Astronaut completely over, bringing the planet immediately below it, to the downward one. I was, of course, approaching Mars on the daylight side, and nearly in the centre. This, however, did not exactly suit me. During the whole of this day it was impossible that I should sleep for a minute; since if at any point I should find that I had

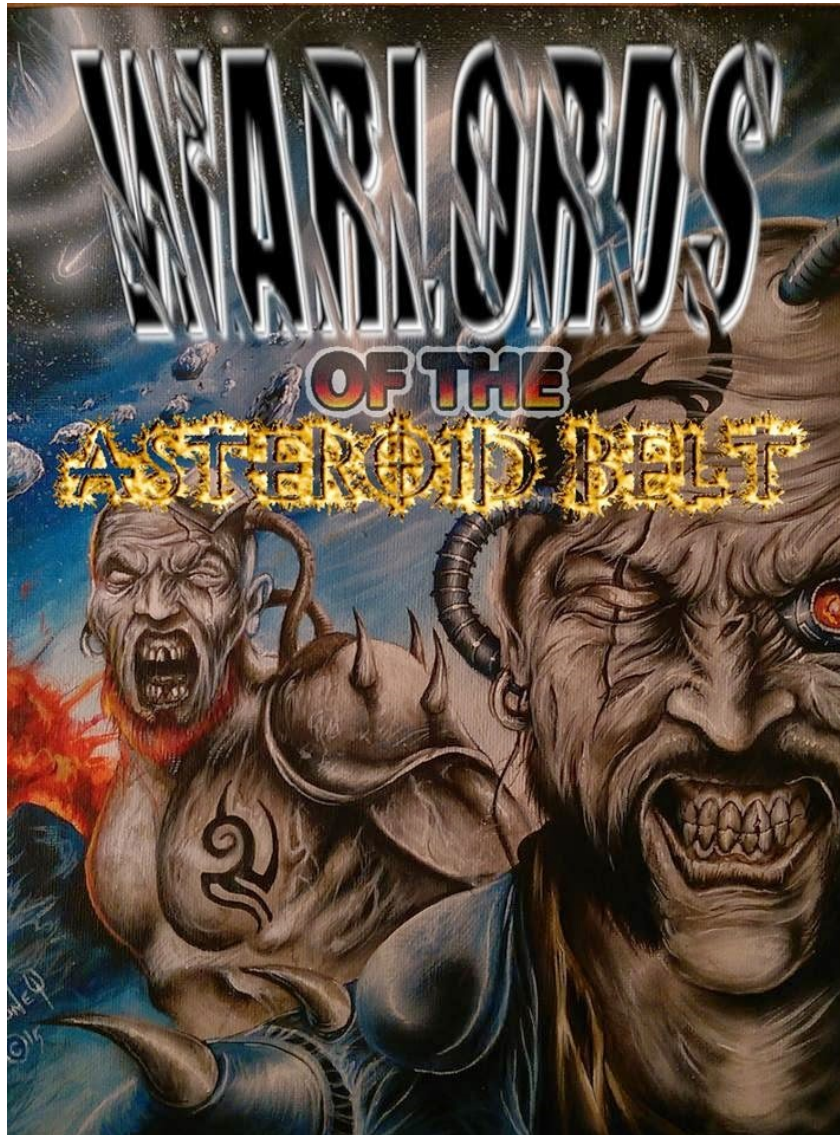
miscalculated my rate of descent, or if any other unforeseen accident should occur, immediate action would be necessary to prevent a shipwreck, which must without doubt be fatal. It was very likely that I should be equally unable to sleep during the first twenty-four hours of my sojourn upon Mars, more especially should he be inhabited, and should my descent be observed. It was, therefore, my policy to land at some point where the Sun was setting, and to enjoy rest during such part of the twelve hours of the Martian night as should not be employed in setting my vessel in order and preparing to evacuate it. I should have to ascertain exactly the pressure of the Martian atmosphere, so as not to step too suddenly from a dense into what was probably a very light one. If possible, I intended to land upon the summit of a mountain, so high as to be untenanted and of difficult access. At the same time it would not do to choose the highest point of a very lofty range, since both the cold and the thinness of the air might in such a place be fatal. I wished, of course, to leave the Astronaut secure, and, if not out of reach, yet not within easy reach; otherwise it would have been a simple matter to watch my opportunity and descend in the dark from my first landing-place by the same means by which I had made the rest of my voyage.

At 18h. I was within 8000 miles of the surface, and could observe Mars distinctly as a world, and no longer as a star. The colour, so remarkable a feature in his celestial appearance, was almost equally perceptible at this moderate elevation. The seas are not so much blue as grey. Masses of land reflected a light between yellow and orange, indicating, as I thought, that orange must be as much the predominant colour of vegetation as green upon Earth. As I came still lower, and only parts of the disc were visible at once, and these through the side and end windows, this conviction was more and more strongly impressed upon my mind. What, however, was beyond denial was, that if the polar ice and snow were not so purely and distinctly white as they appear at a distance upon Earth, they were yet to a great extent devoid of the yellow tinge that preponderated everywhere else. The most that could be said was, that whereas on Earth the snow is of that white which we consider absolute, and call, as such, snow-white, but which really has in it a very slight preponderance of blue, upon Mars the polar caps are rather cream-white, or of that white, so common in our flowers, which has in it an equally slight tinge of yellow. On the shore, or about twenty miles from the shore of the principal sea to the southward of the equator, and but a few degrees from the equator itself, I perceived at last a point which appeared peculiarly suitable for my descent. A very long range of mountains, apparently having an average height of about 14,000 feet, with some peaks of probably twice or three times that altitude, stretched for several hundred miles along the coast, leaving, however, between it and the actual shore-line an alluvial plain of some twenty to fifty miles across. At the extremity of this range, and quite detached from it, stood an isolated mountain of peculiar form, which, as I examined it through the telescope, appeared to present a surface sufficiently broken and sloped to permit of descent; while, at the same time, its height and the character of its summit satisfied me that no one was likely to inhabit it, and that though I might descend-it in a few hours, to ascend it on foot from the plain would be a day's journey. Towards this I directed my course, looking out from time to time carefully for any symptoms of human habitation or animal life. I made out by degrees the lines of rivers, mountain slopes covered by great forests, extensive valleys and plains, seemingly carpeted by a low, dense, rich vegetation. But my view being essentially of a bird's-eye character, it was only in those parts that lay upon my horizon that I could discern clearly the height of any object above the general level; and as yet, therefore, there might well be houses and buildings, cultivated fields and divisions, which I could not see.

Before I had satisfied myself whether the planet was or was not inhabited, I found myself in a position from which its general surface was veiled by the evening mist, and directly over the

mountain in question, within some twelve miles of its summit. This distance I descended in the course of a quarter of an hour, and landed without a shock about half an hour, so far as I could judge, after the Sun had disappeared below the horizon. The sunset, however, by reason of the mists, was totally invisible.

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## THE WAR OF THE WORLDS by HG Wells

### Book One: The Coming of The Martians

#### Chapter Eight: Friday Night

The most extraordinary thing to my mind, of all the strange and wonderful things that happened upon that Friday, was the dovetailing of the commonplace habits of our social order with the first beginnings of the series of events that was to topple that social order headlong. If on Friday night you had taken a pair of compasses and drawn a circle with a radius of five miles round the Woking sand pits, I doubt if you would have had one human being outside it, unless it were some relation of Stent or of the three or four cyclists or London people lying dead on the common, whose emotions or habits were at all affected by the new-comers. Many people had heard of the cylinder, of course, and talked about it in their leisure, but it certainly did not make the sensation that an ultimatum to Germany would have done.

In London that night poor Henderson's telegram describing the gradual unscrewing of the shot was judged to be a canard, and his evening paper, after wiring for authentication from him and receiving no reply—the man was killed—decided not to print a special edition.

Even within the five-mile circle the great majority of people were inert. I have already described the behaviour of the men and women to whom I spoke. All over the district people were dining and supping; working men were gardening after the labours of the day, children were being put to bed, young people were wandering through the lanes love-making, students sat over their books.

Maybe there was a murmur in the village streets, a novel and dominant topic in the public-houses, and here and there a messenger, or even an eye-witness of the later occurrences, caused a whirl of excitement, a shouting, and a running to and fro; but for the most part the daily routine of working, eating, drinking, sleeping, went on as it had done for countless years—as though no planet Mars existed in the sky. Even at Woking station and Horsell and Chobham that was the case.

In Woking junction, until a late hour, trains were stopping and going on, others were shunting on the sidings, passengers were alighting and waiting, and everything was proceeding in the most ordinary way. A boy from the town, trenching on Smith's monopoly, was selling papers with the afternoon's news. The ringing impact of trucks, the sharp whistle of the engines from the junction, mingled with their shouts of "Men from Mars!" Excited men came into the station about nine o'clock with incredible tidings, and caused no more disturbance than drunkards might have done. People rattling Londonwards peered into the darkness outside the carriage windows, and saw only a rare, flickering, vanishing spark dance up from the direction of Horsell, a red glow and a thin veil of smoke driving across the stars, and thought that nothing more serious than a heath fire was happening. It was only round the edge of the common that any disturbance was perceptible. There were half a dozen villas burning on the Woking border. There were lights in all the houses on the common side of the three villages, and the people there kept awake till dawn.

A curious crowd lingered restlessly, people coming and going but the crowd remaining, both on the Chobham and Horsell bridges. One or two adventurous souls, it was afterwards found,



went into the darkness and crawled quite near the Martians; but they never returned, for now and again a light-ray, like the beam of a warship's searchlight swept the common, and the Heat-Ray was ready to follow. Save for such, that big area of common was silent and desolate, and the charred bodies lay about on it all night under the stars, and all the next day. A noise of hammering from the pit was heard by many people.

So you have the state of things on Friday night. In the centre, sticking into the skin of our old planet Earth like a poisoned dart, was this cylinder. But the poison was scarcely working yet. Around it was a patch of silent common, smouldering in places, and with a few dark, dimly seen objects lying in contorted attitudes here and there. Here and there was a burning bush or tree. Beyond was a fringe of excitement, and farther than that fringe the inflammation had not crept as yet. In the rest of the world the stream of life still flowed as it had flowed for immemorial years. The fever of war that would presently clog vein and artery, deaden nerve and destroy brain, had still to develop.

All night long the Martians were hammering and stirring, sleepless, indefatigable, at work upon the machines they were making ready, and ever and again a puff of greenish-white smoke whirled up to the starlit sky.

About eleven a company of soldiers came through Horsell, and deployed along the edge of the common to form a cordon. Later a second company marched through Chobham to deploy on the north side of the common. Several officers from the Inkerman barracks had been on the common earlier in the day, and one, Major Eden, was reported to be missing. The colonel of the regiment came to the Chobham bridge and was busy questioning the crowd at midnight. The military authorities were certainly alive to the seriousness of the business. About eleven, the next morning's papers were able to say, a squadron of hussars, two Maxims, and about four hundred men of the Cardigan regiment started from Aldershot.

A few seconds after midnight the crowd in the Chertsey road, Woking, saw a star fall from heaven into the pine woods to the northwest. It had a greenish colour, and caused a silent brightness like summer lightning. This was the second cylinder.

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