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# **Schlock!**

## **WEBZINE**

**VOL. 11, ISSUE 30  
10TH SEPTEMBER  
2017**

### **RED DEMON VERSUS THE WORM PEOPLE**

**BY NEAL PRIVETT  
WE WILL GIVE  
VOICE TO THE RATS  
IN THE WALLS...**

### **IT CAME FROM THE SEA**

**BY GARY MURPHY  
DRAPED IN  
SEAWEED...**

### **HOLDING THE LINE BY PAUL LUBACZEWSKI**

### **THE LEGEND OF THE JOINT SNAKE BY MATHIAS JANSSON**

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# SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Gavin Chappell

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Schlock! Webzine

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## SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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## EDITORIAL

This week, a wrestler encounters sinister subterranean worm people, a corporate boss murders a friend, a call centre worker learns of the mysterious Line Man, and a descent into the abyss results in a meeting with the king of the underworld.

Gary prepares for an interview. The Grand Marquis is destroyed. The colonists on Lincoln Island find evidence that Ayrton is still alive. And Olaf comes to the Valley of the Kings.

—Gavin Chappell

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## RED DEMON VERSUS THE WORM PEOPLE by Neal Privett

Red Demon carefully navigated the treacherous mountain roads in his jaguar convertible, the thrill of another victory in the ring still resonating in his head. He groaned and massaged the soreness in his arm with his left hand, keeping the right on the steering wheel. Señor Guapo, with his bleached blonde locks and gleaming silver tights, had been a formidable opponent. The Americano was a pretty boy, but not to be underestimated. In one round, Senor Guapo had camel clutched, pile-driven, and head-butted Demon nearly senseless and he now felt the painful after-effects of the match as he drove the long and winding mountain road home.

But despite the younger rival's strength and agility, Demon had managed to pin him to the mat and now returned home a winner.

The luchador pushed the red sports car over the mountains as the moon painted everything in a silver glow and the night winds blew dreamily through the open top. With his crimson red mask and flowing satin cape, Red Demon would have been quite a sight for any passing motorists. The public loved him. His career was pushing twenty successful years. The ring...comic books...movies. The Demon was flying high in his native country. The fans were the best. Hearing his name chanted in the packed audience was a sacred feeling. He never grew tired of it.

The call came through just as Demon began the descent into the valley where his bungalow waited. He groaned. He wanted rest more than anything right now, but obviously this call was an emergency. Pushing thoughts of a hot bath and a good night's sleep out of his head, Demon snatched up the phone.

It was Professor Huerta. "Red Demon?"

"Yes, Professor?"

"Something terrible has happened! They have my daughter!"

A cold chill crawled over Demon's body like spiders in a tomb. "I am on it, Professor! Please don't worry!"

"I know that you must be exhausted after your match...but I need you! Find Ana!"

"I will, sir...don't worry..."

"They want the book, Demon!"

"Professor...I advised you to destroy that damnable book! Nothing but evil can come from its bloody pages!"

"I know now that you were correct, Demon! I have the text in my study. They left a note...demanding the book to be left at the mouth of the San Carlos cave at midnight tonight!"

"They cannot get that book in their possession, Professor...or the entire human race will be threatened!"

“That is why I am calling you, Demon! Get my daughter back from those fiends and I will destroy the book for good!”

“Don’t worry, Professor! I will save Ana!”

“Thank you, Demon! Report back to me when she is safe!”

“I will, sir! Red Demon out!” The luchador ended the call and placed the phone under the seat. All thoughts of sleep were forgotten. Now there was only the searing need to do his duty. He leaned forward and stepped on the accelerator. Up ahead was the unpaved road that led to the cave, a taboo place for the locals. No one ventured that far out and certainly no one dared to explore the dark recesses of San Carlos cave. He swerved to make the next left and sped down a sandy side road with a great cloud of dust billowing sky high behind him.

The famed luchador nearly slammed on the brakes when the forbidding cave appeared ahead. It loomed at the base of the mountain like a monster’s gaping mouth, ready to swallow the Red Demon alive and grind his bones into powder.

The jaguar rolled to a stop a few feet away from the entrance. Demon drew an anxious breath and trudged forward, though his uncooperative legs felt like jelly. Somewhere, deep in the darkness was the scientist’s abducted daughter. And somewhere, lost in the forbidden regions of the earth’s dark interior waited something else...

The book was known around the world as The Necronomicon...an ancient text that caused madness in those who possessed it. The book was taboo and had been used secretly for centuries for the express purpose of summoning demons and otherworldly deities. They wanted this book...the things in the cave. The mysterious creatures wanted the forbidden tome bad enough to kidnap the daughter of Mexico’s most prominent scientist, the esteemed Professor Huerta, who had dedicated decades to the study of one text: The fabled Necronomicon. Written as a guide to summoning other diabolical worlds, The Necronomicon was written in blood by the mad Arab scholar, Abdul al Hazred in the 700s. The text was thought lost for centuries, until it turned up in Europe and then in the United States, finally arriving below the border much to the chagrin of Red Demon. The book was trouble...and he had warned the professor on more than one occasion to destroy it once and for all. There were some things that man was not meant to know.

And now beings from the world far beneath the earth plotted to take the Necronomicon. With it, they would summon The Old Ones; ancient, monstrous gods that had ruled the earth long before man was a twinkle in the eye of the cosmos and had retreated back to the cold stars from whence they came. Not only would the perpetrators from the cave summon these interstellar horrors back to earth, they would also open up dimensions closed for millennia, raise the evil dead, and unleash destruction on a scale unknown to mankind.

Red Demon could not allow that to happen.

The flashlight's beam cut through the darkness of the cave. The shadows were thick. They almost choked the breath from Demon's throat. But he continued onward, deeper and deeper into the earth. His heart trembled when he realized that the air was growing colder by degree the farther he went and that the upper world under the stars fell farther behind with every careful step he made. The cave was a straight shot, at least for now. He wondered how he would ever find his way back out once the tunnels split off into different directions, vanishing into the mountain. Men had been lost forever following the disorienting curve of caves, their bones disappearing into darkness to become powder in some lost chamber far from the world of humans. Demon sighed and strengthened his resolve. He would not become lost. He would not fail. The doctor was depending on him.

The fate of mankind itself depended on him.

The moments passed like the icy drops of water that fell from the ceiling. Time seemed to stand still as the tunnel snaked through the ancient mountain. Soon the narrow confines of the tunnel opened up into a great chamber and Demon could not help but pause and stare in awe at the stalactites and stalagmites reaching up from the cave floor and down from the sparkling ceiling. For the first time, the cave seemed to be another world, not just a forbidding hole tucked away from the eyes of man.

But despite the surreal beauty of this chamber, there still existed a gnawing sense of dread that permeated all. The cool stream that flowed over the smooth stone floor almost glowed a blood red in the light of Demon's flashlight. The glistening moisture of the walls seemed to him at that moment the gleaming eyes of a thousand devils lurking and the rock formations appeared to be their fangs, waiting to tear his flesh to shreds and rend his bones into powder. The luchador, moving with a hard-won caution nurtured by years of worthy opponents...in and out of the ring, pulled his glittered cape close around his bare chest and continued down through the cavern. Somewhere down there...beyond this enchanted chamber...the girl waited. Along with horrors unimaginable.

Demon wondered if the girl was still alive. Of course she was. She had to be. Those things only had one bargaining chip and that was Ana. They wanted The Necronomicon and she was their only hope of obtaining it.

On the far side, the cavern began to shrink and finally descended into a cramped tunnel that turned downward into blackness. The strange beauty of the cavern was gone. Demon found himself squeezing through a space unfit for humans, forcing himself down and down, as if he were transgressing the outer boundaries of Hell itself. A small trickle of water flowed beneath him as the tunnel shrank even further and he was forced to push himself along on his back. Demon's gut rumbled with fear when he realized that he was pushing along blindly and could no longer see what was ahead.

The cold hard ceiling was now a mere two or three feet from his face. And soon the frightened squeals and squeaks of startled bats assailed his ears. He cried out when a small contingent of the winged mammals scurried from their roost, over his face, and back down the tunnel behind him. Demon fought down the revulsion and panic when one of the small bats latched onto his mask and screeched as the luchador thrashed back and forth in an effort to unseat the small beast. But a sense of relief came when the creature hopped over his lips and darted away into the darkness. Demon spat. "Dios mío, man!"



The anxious luchador inched his way through the remainder of the tunnel and came out on the far side. Once again, the cave opened up into a larger chamber, full of silent wonder. More stalactites and stalagmites rose from the floor and hovered on the ceiling, giving the cave the aura of the fantastic. If this was another time...another cave...he would bring his easel and paints down here and preserve this aesthetic vision on his canvas for posterity. Demon smiled. Not many fans knew that this massive bear of a wrestler was also an artist. Wouldn't that shock his adoring public?

A reddish tinge danced on the formations when they appeared in his flashlight beam, and Demon found himself spellbound once again at the natural wonder of this place. But he had no time for sightseeing. He took one more step, then froze.

Something moved ahead.

A shadow appeared along the wall, then vanished. Something alive was in this chamber, watching him from behind a large rock. He could feel its eyes on him, observing his every move. There would be no stealthy advance. They knew he was coming.

Demon moved closer. His voice echoed across the chamber. "I see you! Show yourself!"

Pure terror was not an emotion Red Demon experienced as a rule, but when the slimy, creeping thing emerged from behind the rock and the luchador beheld its gleaming eyes, bug-like fanged lips, and pinkish-white skin for the first time, he felt a stark fear rising from deep within himself that required every ounce of stamina and strength to fight back down.

The pitiful creature shielded its eyes from Demon's flashlight and the luchador was savvy enough to keep the beam right in the thing's face as a precaution against the potential threat. Obviously, the beast was not accustomed to such a harsh light. For now, this simple battery-operated torch would be Demon's bargaining chip.

The thing's voice was strained, as if it did not speak often. The sound of its words was a gruesome melody that whistled from its tiny mouth, "Who...are...you, stranger? What do you...want here?"

Demon pointed the light right into the thing's eyes and it fell back. "They call me Red Demon..."

The thing shielded its eyes with a short, suctioned arm and moved a step closer again. "You have come for the girl?"

Demon continued to hold the beast at bay with the light as he spoke. He silently prayed that the batteries held out. "Yes. Where is she?"

"She is safe. You, however...are not! Leave our home...go back to the upper world!"

"Not without the girl!"

Before Red Demon could make a move, he was surrounded. The flashlight was knocked from his grip and taken from him. A dozen or more of the weird creatures descended upon him with tentacled arms sliding around his bare chest and arms, leaving a coating of slime that

smelled of rot and decay and other terrible and unnameable things that lurked hidden beneath the earth that men walked upon. Even though the creatures moved slowly as individuals, as a team, their speed was blinding. They reminded Demon of an octopus he met once while diving off the coast of Acapulco. Long, suctioned tentacles shot from beneath the coral that day to grapple an unwary fish and pull it to its demise in the salty deep. Now, Demon was the fish and he was being pulled deeper into the caverns to face his own brand of destruction.

But he would not go without a brawl.

His fist struck the thing closest him and vanished into the monster's jelly-like flesh. The creature moaned and temporarily released his arm. Falling to the stone floor, Demon flipped another creature over his head. The humanoid worm sailed helplessly through the air and splatted against the far wall. The beast's slime oozed down the stone behind it and came to rest in a clear puddle. But before Demon could move again, a sharp, blinding pain shot through his shoulder. He glanced around just in time to see one of the worm-like creatures, with its beady eyes glowing a bright fluorescent yellow and its sharp ivory fangs embedded in his flesh.

The venom that pumped into his blood worked fast.

Red Demon awoke sometime later.

At first, he did not remember his whereabouts. But slowly, the venom began to wear off and the cave came into focus, as did his memory. He recalled why he now found himself in the soft semi-darkness of this subterranean world. Ana. He glanced around, but she was nowhere to be found. A soft, translucent light permeated the chamber, allowing him to see. The light was in no way bright, but it drenched everything in a dim illumination so that he was not lost in total darkness. He was thankful for that much. Some of the light came from strange, flameless torches that appeared to be glued to the wall with some kind of adhesive substance. These torches produced a white-blue glow. The worms themselves also put out a dim light. Their bodies glowed softly in the cave, making them perceptible to Demon's eyes.

Red Demon's mind throbbed and resonated with a strange haze and his body ached terribly, as if he had taken a beating unsurpassed in the ring. Gradually, he realized that he was lying on his back, chained to a stone slab.

A throng of the worm-things surrounded him. Red Demon groaned at the horror of their physical appearance. The things were disgusting to look at, but the luchador could not turn away. He lay there, a captive restrained, locked in the beady glare of the creatures' dark bulbous eyes.

They were not tall...perhaps a good four foot in height. They were almost albino, with the exception of a pinkish tinge that permeated their slimy flesh. Their bodies were completely hairless. A row of perhaps three short, stubby arms lined their chests. These members were suctioned, almost like the arms of a squid. They had no legs, only two similar, but larger, appendages like the arms. They rolled across the cave floor on these, leaving a revolting trail of slime in their wake.

One of them slithered closer and began to speak. “You should not have come here.”

Demon laughed. “Sí ...tell me about it!”

“The girl will not go with you. She has a higher purpose. With her help, we will gain the all-powerful tome that will give to us the supreme power on earth.”

“The Necronomicon?”

The worm-thing took a step back and stared in shock at the chained wrestler. “You know of this text?”

“I can read, man! Yes, I know of this...text. It should have been thrown on a fire ages ago!”

The creature snarled. “You are a fool! We will gain control of The Necronomicon and with it, we will call down the omnipotent Cthulhu from the stars! We will open up the gates of hell and unleash all the demons to rain endless blood down on your world! We will unlock the dark secrets of the crawling things and they will rise from the tombs and swamps of the world to take their rightful place beside us!” The thing paused and a cruel smile broke across its face. Red Demon winced as a row of fangs protruded from its lower lip. “We will give voice to the rats in the walls and conjure up Gol-Goroth and Bal-Sagoth to make mankind fall to its knees in fear! Finally, the worm men shall ascend to the upper world and rule as we have been destined to do for untold ages!”

“That’s quite a plan, amigo.... but you forgot one thing,” Red Demon said with a grin.

“What is that?”

“You still have to get past me!”

The chamber burst out into wild laughter. All around him, the worm creatures cackled and howled. Red Demon looked around and smiled again. “Laugh it up! When I get my chance, I am gonna break you all into greasy pieces!”

They looked so pathetic with their bellies wobbling and their slimy bodies contorting with laughter. But despite physical appearances, they were a race of monsters not to be underestimated. These weird beings had a plan for world domination, and unless Demon intervened, they just might pull it off.

It was fantastic. These monsters had lived far beneath the earth for eons, unknown to humans. Had they once ruled the upper world? Had mankind banished them to the caverns and pits of the earth’s dark centre? Perhaps they had once walked beneath the stars millennia before mankind was a blur in the cosmos’s eye. Perhaps they had ruled alongside the horrible god Cthulhu and vanished into the earth’s core when their god returned to the stars with a half-whispered oath to return one day and conquer what was once his...

Red Demon’s brain boggled at the unreal possibilities. There was little wonder that men went mad with knowledge such as this and spent their final days laughing uncontrollably in a padded room. And at the centre of all this madness was the book. That damnable book. These

things could never get control of The Necronomicon. Whatever the cost, he could not allow it.

Demon strained against his chains and his heart raced with adrenaline when he felt one of the screws start to give way and pull from the soft stone. He pushed against his bonds with everything he had, flexing the well-developed muscles in his arms and chest until the screws pulled free. Demon wrapped one end of the chain around his fist and jumped from the slab, swinging the long length like a broad bladed axe. The end of the chain caught one of the worm men across the head and its face vanished in an explosion of broken teeth and slimy green gore. Red Demon swung the thick chain again and another monster went down in a sickening pile of ooze and slime.

Demon kicked out and knocked two more to the stone floor, then he flipped himself over the heads of the advancing worm men and, using both hands, pulled the chain taut around the torsos of at least four of the vile creatures. With his biceps bulging, the luchador squeezed the chain until it cut through the worm bodies and unleashed a shower of black gut and yellow slime that reminded Demon of a squashed caterpillar.

One of the creatures screamed, “Stop him!”

But Red Demon would not be stopped so easily. His fist caught the beast and knocked it flat. Then he brought his boot heel down hard on the thing’s cranium and grimaced with revulsion as its bloody brains exploded all over his red tights. Demon kicked the gory carcass away from him and leaped across the slab as the beasts came around the side after him. He kicked and punched his way through them and headed for the opening into the adjoining chamber where he stopped in his tracks and stared straight ahead in shock.

It was Ana, sitting on a stone seat, against the wall. But something was wrong with her. She sat like a silent angel in the dull glare of the cave light. She stared straight ahead and did not move or speak. She did not acknowledge Demon’s presence in the least.

He flipped a worm man over his shoulder and drove his fist into the thing’s face. Several more rushed into the chamber where Demon stood, but they all stopped and stared in awe at the silent girl.

“You cannot take her,” one of the beasts screamed.

Demon glanced down at the base of Ana’s throne. His flashlight lay beside her sandaled foot, as if it had been placed there as an offering by creatures who did not fully fathom what the device was used actually for. He reached down and grabbed the light, flicking on the switch and swinging a swath of light around, right into the eyes of the subterranean monsters behind him. Luckily the batteries were still good. The beam of light cut into the worm creatures like a sword blade and they scattered to the far corners of the chamber.

Demon grabbed the girl and pulled her towards him. “Let’s go!” He carried her out of the chamber and back to the narrow tunnel, where she finally awoke from her trance and began to struggle. “Put me down!”

Red Demon did as she asked.

“There’s a better way out of here,” she said, coming to her senses. “Follow me!”

The girl led Demon back the opposite way, down a side passage that he never knew was there before. The new tunnel led away from the main chamber and vanished into darkness before opening up again into another dimly lit room. And there in the midst of the ghostly blue light was a strange machine; cold blue metal of some otherworldly alloy...reaching to the roof of the cavern. A solid ton of metal rushed downwards, forming a long cylindrical cannon, the very tip of which was as slender as a man’s thumb. It pointed to a spot on the floor. The device was unlike any earthly machinery Red Demon had ever seen.

“Ana...what is this? What do these monsters use this infernal machine for?”

The girl stared in awe at the great machine. “This is a growth ray. They use this machine to make monsters.”

“What kind of monsters?”

The ear-piercing sound of a laser filled the chamber. Demon rushed over to the control panel, but there was no one operating it. Some unseen force moved the lever and pressed the buttons that brought the alien craftsmanship to life. An ominous red button glowed and pulsated as the laser expanded and began to move. The cannon itself moved automatically, cutting a trench into the very rock of the cave floor. There was a commotion, as if the darkness down in the shallow trench was moving. Demon gasped as dozens of crawling things squirmed up from beneath the floor, finally free. The writhing, quivering army of insects and arachnids were devoid of any colour and shined an almost solid white in the glare of the laser, which drenched their hides in a crimson hue of unknown properties, but strangely enough did not kill them. Instead, the red light of the laser had the opposite effect. It nourished the creeping bodies and made them grow in size. Demon stood there, transfixed with horror as cockroaches, centipedes, and spiders grew to the size of a small dog...then to the size of a human being and beyond. In a span of mere seconds, Red Demon found himself cowering beneath the towering might of super insects that rose from the cavern floor and hovered over Demon and Ana with mandibles dripping saliva and claws that sliced the air and reached out ravenously for prey.

The insects were blind. The heads were devoid of eyes. This was not an uncommon trait in subterranean insects that frequented the deeper confines of caves. But this fact did not make the giant creatures less deadly. In fact, much to Demon’s chagrin, it gave the things an almost supernatural ability to hear and sense.

Ana backed towards the cavern’s exit, with her eyes locked upon the clicking horrors that glared down at the two helpless humans. Demon could hear her laboured breathing as she tried to escape. A cockroach, as big now as a three-story building stepped from the ray and advanced towards the terrified girl.

“Careful,” Demon whispered. “Don’t move...those things can’t see, but they can hear your heartbeat!” The girl began to cry uncontrollably and the sound caused the giant roach’s antennae to wriggle and search and its mandibles to snap open and shut in anticipation of her

succulent flesh. Red Demon reached out to Ana as she moved past but the girl broke free and raced in panic for the exit, which may have well been a million miles away.

The cockroach lunged hungrily after the girl, but before it could wrap its pincers around her, a humongous spider bounced out of nowhere and snatched Ana up in its mouth. She screamed as the horrible white arachnid scurried up the wall and across the ceiling with its juicy prize already vanishing in a cocoon of web.

Demon cried out in terror. He sprinted after them, but the roach, satisfied with a consolation prize, grappled Demon with its razor pincers. The luchador was at the savage mercy of the creature as it lifted him skyward. Trickle of warm blood rose to the surface of Demon's skin and rolled down his chest. The smell of blood made the monster crazy and it roared savagely. The sound was deafening. Demon's ears rang and he fought to maintain consciousness as the roach squeezed tighter. In a second, he would be devoured. Ana would die also, and the worms would move forward with their plan of world domination. It was not only the prospect of death that Red Demon faced, but also the utter defeat of mankind. And there was nothing he could do about it.

He was going to die...far beneath the surface of the earth. The Necronomicon would fall into the hands of evil beings and the Elder Gods would return. Red Demon's eyes misted over beneath his mask as the sounds of the ring escorted him into the next life. It was crazy, but he could feel the mat and taste the salt of his own sweat. He could hear the bell ring and more than that, he could hear the roar of the crowd as they cheered for him and chanted his name on Saturday nights long past.

Demon cried out. His life could not end this way. The world could not end this way. He kicked and screamed as the slaver mouth of the giant insect loomed closer and closer. The creature was straight out of a nightmare or a really bad B-movie; the kind that languished in the run-down sections of Mexican towns in old half-condemned theatres that boasted big rats, broken seats, and sticky floors. The kind of flicks that ran and ran until the film stock deteriorated into scratched, cigarette burned celluloid scar tissue that would hardly endure the thousandth indignity of being fed through a projector once again and not for the last time.

He could feel the monster's hot breath on his face now. He could feel the moisture of its saliva and see the black pit of its gullet as he was raised higher and higher into the fiend's mouth. A horrible clicking sound filled his ears and brain as Red Demon closed his eyes for the last time. Somewhere, far away in the back regions of his mind came the warm applause from a full house for a match well fought.

The giant roach shook violently and the next thing Red Demon knew he was falling through space. The cold hard cavern floor came rushing up to meet him and he landed on his back and rolled, coming to a stop against the side of the worm men's diabolical machinery. The ray was still burning a crevice in the stone floor, still creating giants to rend and tear. A roar echoed across the cavern. A fight for the ages was happening over Demon's aching head. The source of his salvation was even now battling it out with the flesh-eating roach for some primitive supremacy beneath the earth: a writhing centipede as big as a locomotive. The creature hissed and slithered about, wrapping its segmented body around the roach's midsection and squeezing the life from its foe. Gobs of yellow blood formed around the

roach's mouth and the crunching sound of its breaking exo-skeleton signalled the finish. The centipede let the dead giant drop from its grasp and immediately turned on a large arachnid hovering nearby.

Demon picked himself up and struggled to regain his breath. Nothing appeared broken; however, there was little doubt that he would feel the pain later. The centipede and its new arachnid foe were too preoccupied to notice Demon escaping, but the other insects were only just realizing that a meal was at hand and not one of them wanted to share. As soon as the colossal monsters smelled Demon's blood and heard the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, they lunged. Two bone white spiders, with round bellies and long pencil thin legs, shot webbing at the running luchador, but he managed to dive and roll. He sprang back to his feet and headed for the laser. Just as the spiders descended upon him, Demon swung the laser cannon skyward and severed a large stalactite, hanging from the roof above like an icicle. The broken rock came crashing downward, smashing the cannon and crushing the bloodthirsty spiders into mush. The other insects scurried away, but resumed their fight to the death immediately. Demon exited the chamber with its hissing horrors and found his way into the adjoining room where the great spider had carried Ana.

"Please don't let me be too late," Red Demon prayed as he bounced over a large boulder with his glittering cape flying behind him. There, against the wall, was Ana, struggling against the thick webbing that held her tight. The spider had begun a larger web that reached the ceiling above and the far walls on each side. Demon stopped and slowly navigated his way through the room, taking care not to become entangled in the great arachnid's web. "Ana! I am here! Hang on!"

The girl turned her head and a smile of relief broke across her beautiful face. "Red Demon! Help me!"

Demon crawled beneath part of the web and reached Ana. He took a knife from his boot and sawed through the strands that bound the girl and they headed for the far tunnel that led to the upper world and freedom. But the spider returned, hungrier than ever, and angry over the theft of its hard-earned food.

It sprang, knocking demon to the floor. Before he could react, the oversized arachnid was on him, with fangs bared and dripping with venom. The spider's enormous weight held Demon to the ground as it leaned in for the kill. One kiss, and Demon was through. But Red Demon was not going to surrender...not yet. He had come too far. The luchador shoved his knife deep into the creature's abdomen and twisted the blade, opening up a large wound that bled gallons of slime and blood. The sickening gore rolled down Demon's arm and covered his chest. The arachnid slumped over, quite dead. Red Demon crawled out from under the terrible spider and pulled Ana along with him to the waiting tunnel.

But the worm men were not through with Red Demon. A half dozen of the slimy creatures rushed him. Ana screamed and ran from their clutches. One of the worms howled, "Get her! Do not let her escape!"

Demon kicked a worm-thing in the chest and knocked it down, then he pile-driven another and smashed in the face of yet another. The piercing pain of fangs ripping into his flesh caused Demon to pause, but he did not stop. He lashed out and punched the worm, then flipped it over his head and into the oncoming rush of other worms.

Demon launched himself into the air, caught a worm with his ankles and sent the beast crashing to the floor. Its brains left a green puddle that grew larger by the second. Demon stepped over the mess and took another worm down. He fought the dizziness away. Luckily, the creature wasn't able to inject as much venom into his body this time.

He shouted to the girl, "Come on! Keep moving!"

Two more worms appeared from the darkness and desperately attempted to stop the prisoners from escaping. Demon was too strong, too fast. He stiff armed the next worm and vaulted over another, pulling Ana along. Soon the two of them were racing down the dark tunnel, en route to freedom.

Red Demon shivered when he realized that his flashlight was gone. There was a lot of tunnel to transverse before they were safe, and the endless possibilities they could encounter in the dark filled him with dread. "I lost the light, Ana. Making our way back to the surface won't be easy," Demon muttered.

Ana glanced behind them. Demon could hear the distant hissing of the worms as they gave chase. "They come. We must go," Ana said in an emotionless, monotone voice. She took Red Demon by the hand and led him through the tunnel and back through the caverns.

Demon could hear the worms scurrying in the darkness behind them. He could hear them whispering and calling to one another. "Hurry! Catch them! She cannot escape!" Ana seemed unfazed by the pursuers. She pulled the weary luchador along with her and eventually they reached the outer opening of the cave. The worms fell back at some point, when the outer world was in sight and their frantic whisperings faded away into the night.

The moon had descended in the sky by the time Red Demon and Ana left the cave. Demon fell to his knees and breathed a long sigh of relief. "¡Gracias a Dios! I began to think we would never see the stars again!" He glanced up at Ana. She stood there, staring upwards at the firmament, as if searching for something.

"Ana? Are you alright?"

The girl glanced at Demon as if she had been waked from a dream. "What? Oh...yes. I am fine. Come...take me to my father."

Red Demon's convertible pulled up at Dr. Huerta's ranch house. The stars swirled above, still hiding secrets and worlds unknown to man. The night held its secrets, too, and Demon had much to learn still. He helped Ana from the car and escorted her to the front door.

The old man opened the door with a relieved look on his face and threw his arms around his daughter. He sobbed with joy and held the girl to him. Then he brought her in and shook Demon's hand repeatedly, thanking him before finally inviting him inside.

"Let me make you some coffee, my boy! It is the least I can do for the man who rescued my daughter and saved the world..."



Red Demon laughed. "If it is all the same with you, Doctor...I am going home to take a shower and collapse into my bed. I have brought your daughter back. Take the Necronomicon and burn it. Tonight. Take no more chances. Next time I may not be able to help. Buenas noches."

"Buenas Noches, Red Demon. I will do as you ask...and thank you again."

Demon waved and hopped into his convertible and in a flash, the masked wrestler was speeding back across the mountain to his bungalow in the valley.

Something woke Dr. Huerta sometime later. It was still dark and the house was cold with that pre-dawn chill that always crept up the valley just before sunrise. He sat up in bed and tried to shake the grogginess from his brain. The clock was ticking somewhere in the darkness. His heart jumped when he heard the noise again...the sound that obviously woke him.

Someone was in the study.

His blood turned cold all of a sudden. The Necronomicon...it was locked in the safe. Were they here...in his house...to steal the damnable book after their kidnapping plot failed? The old man rose and took the pistol from his nightstand. He checked to make sure it was still loaded and made his way through the bedroom, and down the shadow choked hall.

Dr. Huerta stopped in front of the study.

A crash made him jump. Someone was in there. He took a deep breath and reached inside the study, flipping on the lights. The old man rushed in with his gun raised. His jaw dropped. Standing there, before him, was Ana. She held The Necronomicon in her hands. Huerta glanced behind her. The wall safe was hanging open.

The old man's heart sank. "Ana...no...please tell me it isn't so."

"I am afraid it is, Father," the girl said in a monotone voice. "I am taking The Necronomicon and you will not stop me."

"And you will take it to those creatures in the cave?"

The girl's voice changed all of a sudden. She hissed, sending cold chills down Dr. Huerta's spine. "Enough! Get out of my way, old man!" Ana's face became a blur momentarily and then began to change. Huerta watched in utter shock as his daughter's eyes turned into dark orbs and her face melted into the terrible visage of the conquering worm!

Dr. Huerta screamed, but his horror was interrupted when Red Demon burst into the room. "Demon! Where did you come from?"

"I waited around, Dr. Huerta...something about Ana didn't seem right. All the emotion is gone from her and I couldn't help but note that back in the caves, she could actually see in the dark."

Huerta looked mournfully at the creature who was once his daughter. “Oh, Ana. It would appear that red Demon is right.” The old man turned to Demon. “What do we do now?”

Red Demon reached into his belt and produced a vial. “It occurred to me while I was deep in the caves. What is the one thing that will kill a slug?”

Huerta thought for a moment. “Salt?”

“Exactly. If only I had carried some with me into the caverns.” Demon shot a sympathetic glance at the old man. “I am sorry, Professor. But this must be done.” Huerta looked away and nodded. Demon tossed the contents of the vial over Ana’s face. The room was filled with a gut wrenching howl of pain and in seconds, Ana was dead on the floor, melting into a putrid pile.

Red Demon studied the dead creature on the floor and started to remove his mask. Dr. Huerta grabbed his arm and stopped him. “No, Red Demon. Stop. Why are you unmasking yourself?”

“I...I am retiring after this night.”

“But you did not lose.”

“I killed your only daughter, Doctor. I am giving up my life as a luchador.”

“No, my son. I will not let you. You saved the world from destruction. With that book, the worm men would have summoned up all the horrors of the cosmos to conquer and destroy.”

“But I could not save your daughter...”

“No one could, my boy. Go now...in peace...and fight another day. We are depending on you.”

Red Demon thought for a moment and fastened his mask again. “Yes, Professor.”

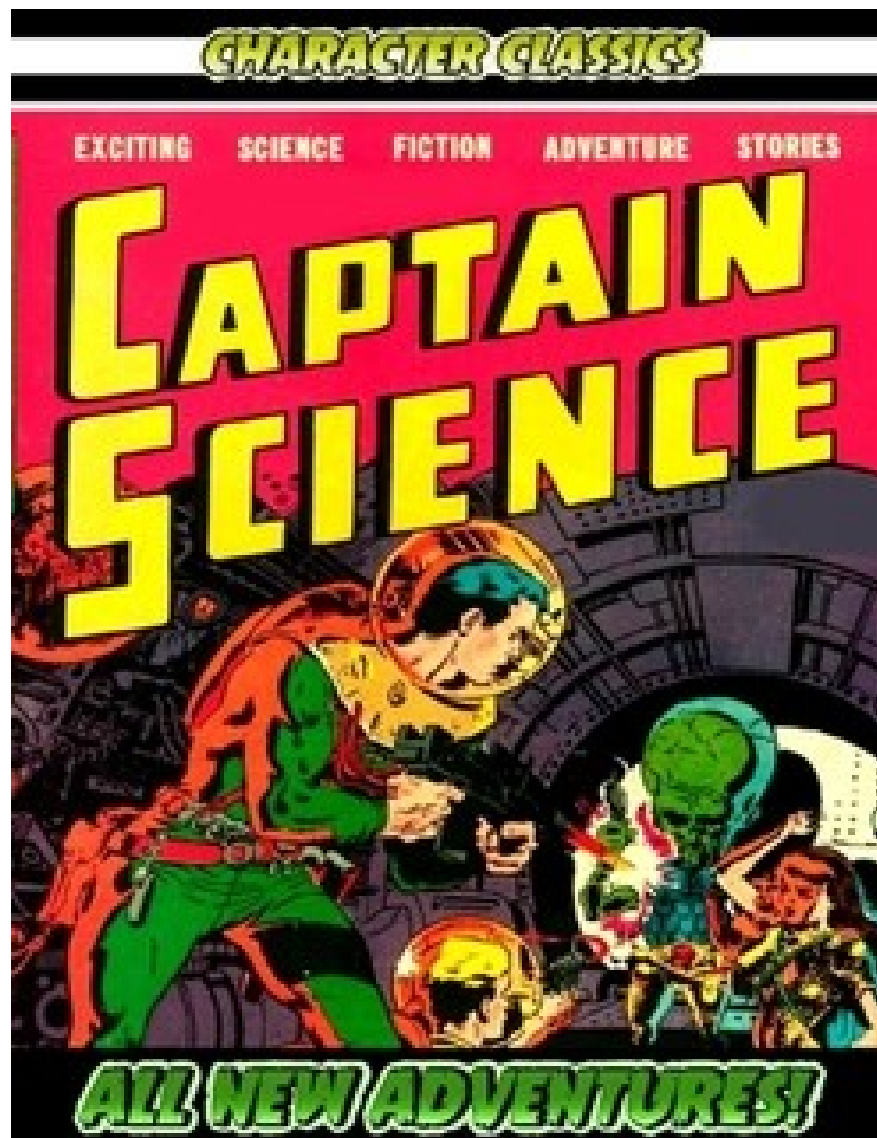
Huerta reached for the book. “Take The Necronomicon. Destroy it.” The old man paused and a look of terror came over his face.

“Professor,” Red Demon said. “What’s wrong?”

“The Necronomicon...it’s gone...”

THE END

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## IT CAME FROM THE SEA by Gary Murphy

Off the Solway Coast, about half a mile from the shore, Leland Brand and his friend Alan Farthing were engaged in one serious fishing session, having been here in this region at least three hours already. So far, they had scored nothing worth writing home about by way of catches. A few shrimps, or what they perceived to be shrimps if shrimps sojourned along the belly surface of the Solway Coast in West Cumbria near Workington Town. The men, both celebrating their fiftieth birthdays this month—this summer, in fact, this July—Alan and Leland paused to have a break and devour their bait. They commented on the shoreline and in particular the great burial ground they could observe from their position in their small fishing vessel in the water. They laughed and joked. It seemed they were enjoying all this much-welcomed hot weather, this sunshine and the cool breeze, from the stable waters their trustworthy dinghy floated on. Everything was going just hunky dory.

“How much did you pay for Daisy again, Alan? Best five pounds you ever invested, if you ask me!” Leland jested, unsure if his friend was in the jovial mood.

Daisy was the dinghy’s name.

Alan put his hand in his pocket and produced a pistol. It was a Luger, a gun his father had thieved from a dying German soldier in wartime France many years before, and passed down through the generations. Alan was smiling. He observed Leland’s bewilderment and actually smiled more broadly.

He said, “End of the line, Leland.”

Sternly, Leland warned, “Put it down, Alan. You’ll go to prison for life. You’ll never walk the streets of Workington again. You’ll get a Council burial when you die—nobody likes a murderer. But that doesn’t have to happen...you can just put the gun away and we’ll put it all behind us. It will never be mentioned again. Please, Alan, don’t be a dummy, we can talk. I know what this is about.”

“Oh, and what is it about, swindler?”

“The corporation check I cashed out on Thursday. The five-hundred-and-fifty thousand that should have gone into your account, which admittedly, I stole...Well, Alan, believe me, I felt guilty about it—I felt massive guilt—and I was going to redirect the capital to your account first thing on Monday morning. Please, Alan, I know I acted like a thief and you have every right to be angry and pissed off at me.”

Alan cocked the gun, when he said, “How many years have we known each other, Leland? I ask you, as an old friend...how many years?”

Pausing to consider, Leland finally said, “About thirty-five, since when we both started as young bucks at the company in Liverpool, when we were both just a mere sixteen years old, before we met our wives-to-be in London, Shirley and Anna...sadly deceased now, both of them...” Leland spotted another angle, “...I married Anna and you married Shirley...tell me, Alan, would they approve of your actions?”

“Shirley always thought you were a snivelling little shit...she warned me that you’d stab me in the back one day. It turns out her suspicions have proven correct.”

“NO, NO, PLEASE, NO...” Leland said, just before Alan Farthing pulled the trigger and put a bullet in the middle of his forehead. Shockingly, as the dead man spiralled over the side of the vessel into the Irish Sea, a festooning spray of blood from the wound projected through the air and struck his killer and dowsed his face with coarse scarlet and fragments of brain tissue, which only served to wipe the sly smile from his face and replace it with an expression of consternation. He sat down and paused to reflect on better times, and his overblown, impulsive actions. These were actions that might have forced him to regret one day, actions he would have to live with down the coming years—not in a million years would he ever have considered himself a potential murderer...not ever, never! But now, it seemed, despite the odds which might have favoured more towards something to the contrary, this wild-eyed event had merely served to extricate any remaining innocence or integrity he had bolstered within his 19-stone frame. It was a deathly and macabre prophecy that was fulfilled here today—for he was exactly that today—a cold-blooded killer.

Casting Leland’s rod and other possessions into the water, Alan set about steering the dinghy towards shore where he would anchor it and head home for an evening meal after a hot shower—a hot shower and a hot meal. But—was he truly bothered? Absolutely not, since he didn’t get to be as high up in the Corporation rankings as he was now if he was anything but ruthless—he had to be fucking ruthless (like all those others)—and just like he’d butchered his best friend in cold blood today, so had he implemented commands for others to be killed, wiped out, assassinated, struck off...it was part and parcel of business acumens, dealing with death on a regular basis.

Tonight, he had sirloin steak and onion rings, passing on the chips, instead having a course of fresh vegetables and, oddly, a tin of hot Heinz beans. It went down very nicely.

And before he knew it, he was in bed.

Would he ever get to sleep tonight or should he get dressed again and go down the pub in town to sink some well-deserved pints of Guinness? Guinness would go down very well now...

Shit, but it was twenty-past-eleven, and would the pub be open? Did he have any cans of Guinness in the fridge? He pondered...yes, there might have been.

But as he was pulling on his dressing gown, Alan Farthing heard a noise from downstairs. Oddly, his thoughts returned to his execution of Leland Brand—his best friend for so many years—before the betrayal, of course—and pondered, crazily and torturously—if it could be the deathly presence Leland in the house, his spirit or his (to be damned ridiculous) zombie returned from the depths of the unforgiving Irish Sea. Chances were by now his body would have washed up on a shoreline in County Mayo. Let the Paddies deal with it. It was their problem now, not his; he was just the messenger, after all—the one who prepared and packed the blood-tinged parcel.

That reminded him of something. He had a business appointment in County Kildare next weekend concerning the Corporation’s Irish-sector recruiting team and their progress in harnessing a solid workforce in the region. God always knew, the Irish were proud, hard-

working people, from either side of the border, North and South. Millions of pounds in money were invested in Belfast as well as in Dublin each year, courtesy of the Company—and it was always a fine investment for a reliable workforce and money well-spent, indeed. Visiting Ireland was always fun, many good times were had, the ladies were lovely, great food and drink, great hospitality, fine culture...yes, he was looking forward to his bi-monthly visit to the Green Isle. But would the experience be the same, now he had killed with his own hands, a murderer himself, since it was he that pulled the trigger of the gun?

Farthing raised his voice, pausing to wipe a solitary tear from his eye, “I know you’re in here! I have a gun and I’m not afraid to use it. It will be you that dies...” and he laughed, feigning mockery. The tactic failed miserably if he sought to frighten the unseen intruder downstairs. “I’m coming to get you! The police are on their way! You’ll be arrested and sent to prison for a very long time! Do you know who I am? I’m Alan Farthing—Alan Farthing of Bulbous Electronics UK!”

A peal of laughter sent shockwaves around the house...

Farthing laughed again. It was a gruff, hollow laugh as he attempted to disguise the fear and horror at being trapped in the house—or upstairs at least. Idea time—he looked across at the telephone in the corner of the bedroom, set on a small wooden table—indeed, why not phone the fucking police and tell them to get their arses around here fast as possible—were they not The Law—did they not do things like that? Great thinking, Batman...

Shit, this wasn’t happening to him. No damned signal. In fact, no damned telephone connection. The line was dead. As dead as Leland Brand, his best friend, washed up half-eaten by marine life his facial features not even resembling the face of Leland Brand...fucking hell, no, no, no...this couldn’t be happening!

Why did he kill Leland? Why was he so stupid? Like Leland said, the money was going to be paid into his account. Why kill him, why shoot him in the head, with all the blood, and the drowning in the sea, lost at sea, and fragments of brain flying through the air, and the blood, the fucking blood, the hole in his friend’s head as he died, and the blood...it was an absolute frigging nightmare, a nightmare happening right now—to him—to him!

He was panicking. Calm down, Alan...just breathe easily one breath at a time and fucking calm the hell down...

Finally, clutching his chest to calm his racing heart, Farthing rested the Luger on the bedside desk and felt rather vulnerable and faint. And then he turned around, sighing heavily.

“Hello, Alan...” the creature draped in seaweed said, its face blue and mouldy, its eyes pool of black oil and sightless—perhaps missing their eyeballs, Farthing could not tell exactly—and it reeked of the seas, the Irish Sea in particular, “...believe me, old friend, when I say I was going to pay the money into your account. Shame you must die, Alan...the sea awaits patiently your arrival.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry...”

A vile litany of perverted laughter filled the air, projected by a cocktail of invisible, hidden water spirits, or those responsible for Leland Brand’s revival and return to life, as the

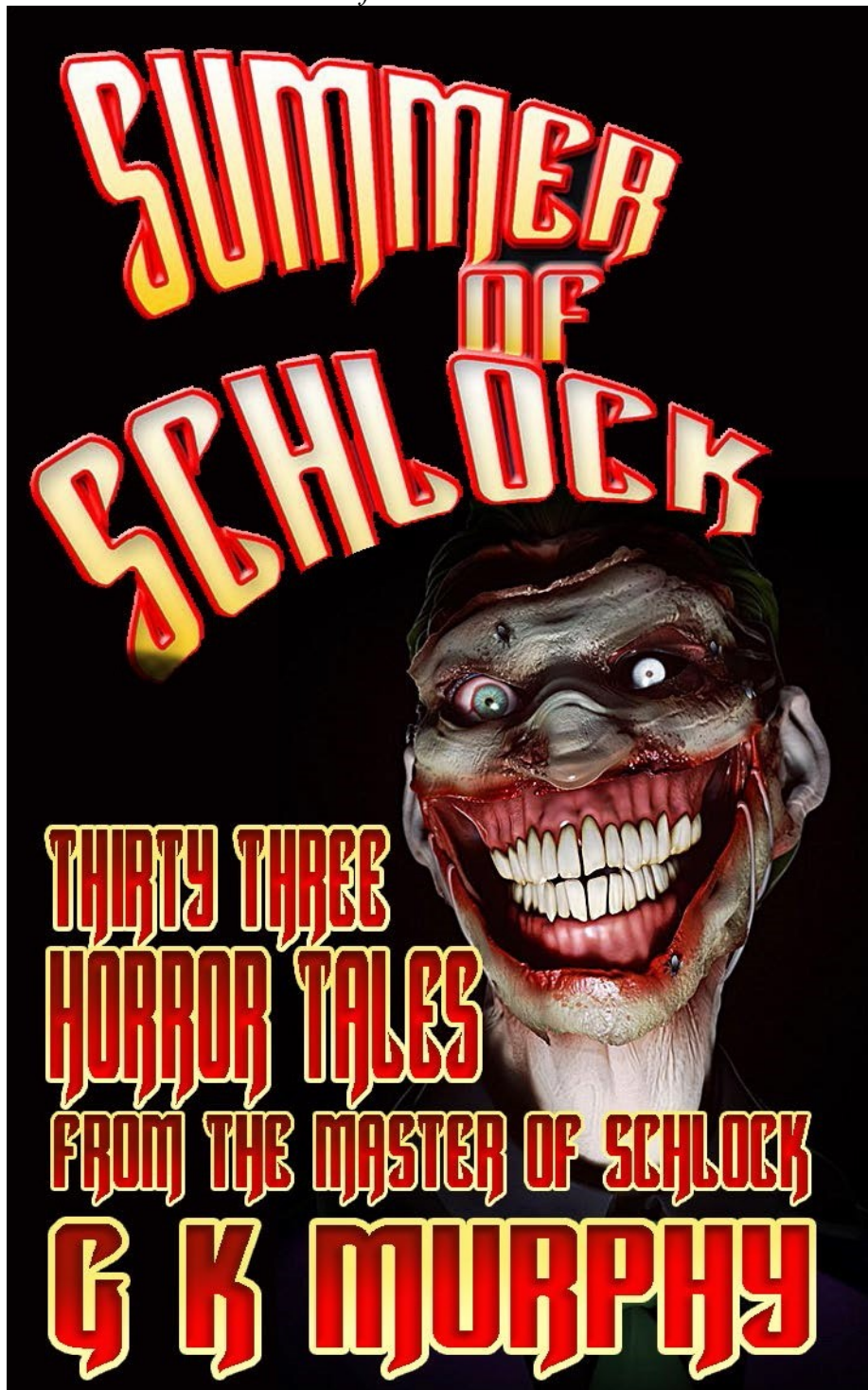
upstairs' bedroom walls and floor reverberated with the obscene sound. "Shame on you..." Leland spluttered, "...shame on you, murderer!"

The laughter escalated to fever pitch as Leland's hands circled the victim's neck.

The Irish Sea beckoned.

THE END

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## HOLDING THE LINE by Paul Lubaczewski

### Part One

*Nobody knew the sacrifice. Nobody knew what he did to keep them safe. It had to remain that way forever. One must suffer, so that others can go through life, never knowing how close the abyss is.*

They called him “The Line Man.” Nobody knew why everybody called him that. When everybody calls somebody something, it soon becomes impossible to track down the root of it. It just becomes something everybody does, or everybody says, Logic has long since left the building on it. There are a million Skeeters out there that have no idea why they go about their lives that way. Look at any popular phrase. There may be a reason for why you even would cry over spilled milk, but nobody remembers what it is.

Line Man was a little man, he looked old, it was hard to tell how elderly, but definitely the impression of age was there. It was hard to tell how old because of the hooded jacket he always wore, no matter the time of year. If it was ninety degrees in the shade, he was still wearing it, no-one had a clue what he looked like without it. The only features that you could see in the depths under his hood were a large hooked nose that stuck out like a beak, and deep sunken glinting eyes. His features seemed rat or weasel-like, what you could see of them in the shadows of his hood that is.

Line Man was a town oddity, well, considering it was a small town and he was renowned past that, even better, he was a regional oddity. Everybody knew of him, and everybody called him the Line Man. He was a feature of the town, no matter how hot, no matter the time of day, in his hooded attire he would just walk up and down the rural highway with its wide berm through Bashford, going to the store and back, almost daily.

Occasionally and randomly his gloved fist would get thrust into the air, and pointed back down. It would just happen. He didn’t turn, he didn’t look at anything or anyone. He wasn’t responding to any stimulus you could see, he just did it. A human curiosity wandering the hills of Appalachia, in the snow, the rain, and the blistering heat. Always with his hooded jacket and his gloves, often with the pouring rain dripping into those haunted, crazed, deep sunk eyes of his.

Bashford was far from being a real town, it was just a place that had grown up and out of the two-lane highway and now squatted on both sides of. No real sidewalks, no city hall, it was just random shops, with huge elderly ancient parking lots that joined together one after the other. Much of it was neglected, places built during the boom times, still open by the grace of God, nobody was spending any money to repair their parking lots, that was for sure. Half of them were just gravel on top of potholes now. There were a few vacant storefronts, but usually, the empty ones were younger buildings, put up by some optimist, who thought the town needed a motorcycle shop, or another bank, or a professional building the town thought that it hadn’t needed at all. The older buildings were still operational, just old and worn, often being run by the same families that dealt out medications and hardware as had done it for generations now. Not all of them were even the things you’d expect that people needed here like they needed the drug store. For whatever reason, an appliance store that had opened

when there only two brands of black and white TVs available was still there, probably with the same TVs.

One thing Bashford did have was a small shopping centre. The only things in it that stayed consistently open were the supermarket and the call centre that had its own separate building connected by a parking. People would open up something next to the supermarket, and often by the time the residents realized the shop was there, it was already closing. It all sat in a little bit of flat space, a premium feature in Appalachia, below the town cemetery where generations of residents had been deposited on the rolling hill. The cemetery had its own cottage industry burying former residents, people who had moved away for work but couldn't bear to have their final resting place be anywhere but in their beloved mountains would leave the request in their wills.

The call centre was why Andy Potts knew about the Line Man at all. The company that ran it was a national one, and they had needed someone to transfer to management there. Andy's family was from the area, and he had found a lovely little house really cheap on a hill outside of Malvern, one of the many little towns in the region, so he had agreed to take the position. He didn't have a wife and kids to worry about, and he'd always been curious to see where his roots were. The money would have been good for Texas where he was living at the time, for the Appalachian region, it was a king's ransom. It was a wonderful opportunity to stockpile some cash while reconnecting with his family's roots.

He first saw the Line Man, at least enough to note him, driving home from work one steaming hot afternoon. He had the air condition absolutely cranked in his little Escape, the Ford AC turning the compartment into a veritable arctic wasteland. There the man was, just patiently trudging along, carrying a couple of bags from the Kroger. It must have been at least 90 degrees out there, and the man was wearing a jacket? With a hood no less? Wearing gloves? Andy was staring so intently he felt the gravel on the shoulder hit his tires and had to jerk it back on to the road.

After that, he noticed him often, always the same, no matter the weather, just trudging along. Not speaking to anyone, not looking at anyone, randomly throwing a gloved hand into the air. Nobody else seemed to notice him any either, nobody disturbed the already disturbed man, as the Line Man wandered through the town like a hooded and shrivelled spectre.

The thing that finally drove Andy to even ask around at work was an attempt to interact with the man. It was pouring rain, just coming down in waves, a storm must have gotten caught coming across the bigger mountains that surrounded Bashford, and had stalled over the town now, unable to get up the strength to force its way over the next mountain. It just sat there, unleashing its load of water where it was. Andy saw the man humping along, a dim figure in the pouring rain. There was no mistaking him, though, even with the poor visibility. Once Andy got closer, the gloved hands made it clear who it was. Andy made a snap decision, pulling the car over off the side of the road, and slowed down. The little man went further into the parking lot they were crossing but made no move to acknowledge Andy or his car.

Andy rolled down the window, and shouted out, "Hey, it's coming down in buckets! You need a ride?"

For just a moment, the man flicked his eyes in Andy's direction. Those deep sunken eyes grew wide for only a moment and then narrowed. With not so much a word, the little man

sped up splashing through puddles, refusing to acknowledge Andy anymore but trudging all the faster.

“C’mon, I don’t mean you no harm. But your gonna catch your death of cold in this!” Andy shouted.

Without even turning to look at him, a cracked elderly voice came from inside the hooded jackets to say only two words, “Go, away!”

Andy just sat there his foot on the break, completely flummoxed by the repudiation and rebuke delivered in those two words by the odd man. Coming to his senses, though, he just shrugged and said to himself, “Your funeral buddy,” before releasing the brake and letting the car pull back onto the road. He drove by the man slowly as he went by, but the man didn’t even spare him a glance, staring straight ahead again before Andy just stepped on the gas and drove away into the pouring sheets of rain.

It had roused his curiosity enough to make him ask around at that point, just too weird to ignore. One day there were a few bodies sitting around in the leader lounge on break. Andy looked around, mentally checking who was in here today, he didn’t want to seem like an out of it doofus for mentioning something everybody else took for granted. He was looking for someone he was pally with to ask.

Having decided that this crew was safe enough, he turned to the one team lead Billy who was watching some amazingly terrible daytime TV on the big screen, “Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Aww gee, Andy, and I was hopin’ to find out if the Judge finally found a plaintive she liked, “Billy winked turning to look at him, “what can I do ya for?”

“I gotta know. What’s the deal with the weird old guy you see walking down the highway?”

“What weird guy? I ain’t never seen no weird old guy,” Billy declared. Seeing Andy’s worried expression he laughed and said, “You’re talking about Line Man, everybody knows Line Man!”

“So, you’ve talked to him?” Andy asked incredulously.

“OK, let me rephrase that, everybody knows of Line Man, how ‘bout that? Naw, he won’t talk to a damned soul, my cousin works as a cashier at the Kroger, guy never says a word. Puts his stuff on the conveyor, pays in cash, leaves,” Billy replied.

Ronnie, an LO3 who had started to eavesdrop joined in adding, “Yeah, but the old weirdo is harmless.”

“Yeah that’s true enough, I suppose. No crime to not talk to nobody after all,” Billy agreed.

“Where does he even live?” asked Andy.

“Don’t even rightly know really,” Ronnie said looking thoughtful,” never thought about it really. I guess up one of them little dirt roads that run off the highway and up into the hills somewhere.”

“Hey, people!” Billy called out. The room got quiet except for the TV, as everybody turned to look, “Any of y’all know where Line Man lives?”

There was a susurrations as people discussed it among themselves, until one of the new Level 4’s, Andy thought his name was Hunter said, “I think he’s got a place in the holler below Flat Top, but I don’t know anybody that’s ever been there, so I could be full of it.”

“Well there ya go, Hunter’s full of it,” said Billy turning back to Andy. “Any particular reason you asked?”

“Well you have to admit it’s weird,” Andy said a little embarrassed by the fuss.

“That he is buddy, that he is.”

Andy kept tabs on Line Man after that, he wouldn’t say he was obsessed with him, but he was curious. It was a boring ride to work alone anyway, and the weird old man broke up the monotony. He would find himself speculating on things, like where the guy got his clothes, did he ever wash them they always seemed to have a sheen of human grease, compacted sweat and oils and road grime, did he have family here, things like that.

Andy found himself turning to speculating on where the old man lived. From asking around he ascertained that he most definitely did not live in town. But that in and of itself gave no ideas, there were run down shacks tucked all over the hills from various boom times. For all he or anyone knew, the old man could just be squatting in one of them. Maybe only a cot to sleep on in a building that was one strong wind away from collapsing entirely.

Andy made a point now, of marking off in his mind the furthest points from the Kroger he’d ever seen the man, hoping to narrow it down. But that’s the problem with what starts as a completely harmless idle speculation if the answers are not soon forthcoming our curiosity, unsated, starts to get the best of us. Andy became obsessed with finding out where the old man resided. If he had stopped to think about it, or if he had more than casual friends, someone who was close enough to demand, “Why do you even care?” it might have ended there. But a single man, living alone in the wilderness of Appalachia, probably has entirely too much free time.

He found workplace romances tacky, not to mention most of his attractive co-workers were already married, and workplace affairs were tacky and cliché beyond belief. He wasn’t religious, so all of the invitations to church, and the social mingling that entailed fell on deaf ears. This left the local bar scene, which had created some dating, but no close attachments, more sex than emotion. The gist of it was there was no-one available to tell him he was being ridiculous, and his time could be better spent in a million different ways. The true perils of boredom and isolation are what we get into when we have nobody to bounce our flights of fancy off of.

Eventually, his curiosity reached a fever pitch, and he took to slowing down on those rare occasions when there wasn't anyone behind him, near Line Man's last known position. Creeping along at twenty-five in a fifty-five, with half an eye on his rear view. Trying to see any kind of driveway leading off, that might lead to the old man's abode.

One afternoon his persistence was rewarded. It might have been a driveway once, but on the day he spotted it, near twilight, all that was visible, was a single straight, and well-worn trail going off into the woods. The trees loomed this close to the road, they were already linking their limbs over the spot where the trail started, so even if it hadn't been twilight, it still would have been dark. If it wasn't for the fact that the woods opened up further back offering a better view of the trail, he would have never been sure if he'd even seen it.

Now that Andy thought he knew where the old guy was holed up, he wasn't even sure what he should do about it. The guy didn't want to talk to him, or anyone else for that matter. Andy had offered to give him a ride in the pouring rain, and the old man wouldn't even say anything to him except to tell him to go away. The thing was, he was almost considered a town possession and treasure, something the people in the area felt vaguely proud of. A lot of areas are like that, some town oddball, everybody has a story about him or her, usually greatly exaggerated. They were part of the very fabric of the area they resided in, they give an area ambiance and character. It's what keeps a small town from being another "blink and you'll miss it" drive through on the highways of America. Andy wanted the whole story, including how the Line Man lived.

Maybe the guy was living in some old shack about to fall down? All alone out there in the woods somewhere. Somebody ought to know exactly where he was if only to tell social services. He seemed pretty old, and the elderly were usually subject to health checks by the authorities. It was practically his duty to check on the old guy. He became convinced it was in everybody's best interest if SOMEBODY checked on the old man's living arrangements.

Truly amazing the little lies we tell ourselves so we can do what we wanted to do in the first place.

Andy found himself now, making up excuses to go through Bashford on his days off. Looking for and hoping to catch sight of the Line Man on his way TO the Kroger, when Andy knew he'd have more time to go look at his residence. He'd scouted a pull off of the road a bit up the mountain as well, so he'd only have to hike the path back into hill once he parked. Andy had no idea how long it would take him to get back there, but if worse came to worse, he could always bolt down the mountainside and come out in Bashford eventually, so he wasn't worried about getting lost. One of the major advantages of a mountain, if you know what's down from you. you always have a good direction to go.

Parking the car, and locking it up, he hurried along the highway back to the trail. Cars whipped by him, buffeting him with winds as he walked, and forcing him to go further and further away from the road for safety. He was practically walking in the ditch by the time he reached his destination. Looking at it now, it was clear that it HAD formerly been a driveway. He could see two tracks a vehicle's width and some gravel peeking through the leaf mould and the weeds that had grown up. Curiously, though, of the two tracks, only one

showed any sign of being used. A thin line of packed dirt heading resolutely straight up the side of the mountain at an angle.

Now he was sure that this was the way he set his own feet to the path. After a short distance, the trees pulled away a bit, creating some open sky above him. The way was now being encroached by wildflowers and grass. Queen Anne's Lace and wild sweet pea dangled lazily into the remains of the roadway, the white and purple flowers lending an almost pleasant feel to the whole affair.

The trail made its way around a bend and led into a wooded hollow in the side of the mountain itself, a gouge left from some previous geological disturbance of some kind or another. Andy now thought he could see, a doorway where the trail was leading in the distance, but not the whole house because of the heavy forestation in the way.

When he got closer, he was not greeted with the ramble down shack of his expectations. Rather, what came more and more into view as he approached the wooded copse that held the house, was some grand leftover of a bygone era of prosperity in the region. Most amazing of all, the house itself was in fine condition, painted it a dark grey, it practically blended into the woods that housed it. Now up close, it looked in nicer condition than his own house in Malvern really. Upkeep must be all the old weirdo did with his days, maybe the Line Man wasn't even the owner, but some really weird custodian of the place. Maybe he had been a worker on one of the nearby rail lines and had signed on as a custodian in exchange for room and board for his retirement, it would explain the name at any rate. It happened, a property would change hands a dozen times over the years, for all Andy knew some out of state coal concern now owned the place in a parcel land deal, and had the little man on the payroll without ever having clapped eyes on him.

But if that was the case? Why was there only that little trail leading up to the place? There had been a road, and it had been let go to seed. You'd think if it was some out of town owner, they'd have come out to check on occasion, right? This additional mystery only drove his curiosity even further than it had been, if that was possible. Before it had just been simple nosiness, now, he had to see how this strange old man lived out here away from the entire world.

Andy climbed onto the large porch that curved around to the side of the house, gazing at the scroll-work painted a dark green, stunned by its intricate curls. This, was where a little man, in greasy jeans and a hooded coat, lived? All by himself? The mere concept boggled the mind. He stood at the door trying to peer in through the etched and frosted glass to see if he could see anything inside.

Andy knocked lightly on the main door, still thinking, there must be someone else in this beautiful house, it couldn't be JUST the Line Man living here. The knocking was met with silence and the creaking of the porch boards as he shifted back and forth. Andy gave it a few moments, and then knocked again.

Still nothing.

Now, he was at a loss for what to do. Well, not really, nobody is really at a total loss that often, they are just weighing options. Andy was more, in a position, where the thing he really wanted to do was his last option, but he had to tell himself the lie that it wasn't what he had

wanted to do all along so he had to check off the other options first. He also certainly couldn't acknowledge that he also had the option to just leave and go back to the car. But once he had gone through the mental hoops of making his actions justifiable to his own self-image of "not being nosy", Andy tried the door.

The ornate brass knob turned easily in his grasp, and the door swung inside, smoothly. It made not so much as a squeak as it opened. There were no lights lit of any kind, he hadn't even thought to look to see if there was any electricity running to the place. It was hard to see in the gloom that the woods created inside, but what he could see, was just as ornate and well-kept as the exterior had been. The entire thing was like stepping back in time to visit a very rich uncle at the turn of the twentieth century.

"Hello?" he called out, not having any idea whatsoever what he'd do if someone answered. Thankfully the house remained silent. He stepped into the place, his hiking boots only making the gentlest of noises on the hardwood floor of the entrance way. Now that Andy was inside, he was faced with a decision, he had four directions to choose from, all of them immaculately decorated in a continued period fashion for the late 1800's. It reminded him of a mansion tour he'd taken once. He could check either of the rooms to either side of the entrance, go down the hallway deeper into the first floor, or climb the stairs.

After considering it, he decided on the stairs. He had no idea how long the old man would be gone, or if he himself would ever be able to work up the nerve again to come back. If he wanted to see what the rooms looked like upstairs he'd have to hurry and look now. The other rooms on this floor he could look at if the Line Man hadn't returned by then, and hope for a back door to slip out of undetected.

Andy climbed the stairs slowly and carefully. It was foolish he kept telling himself, there was no-one in the house, but he couldn't stop himself. When Andy reached the second floor the light that oozed through the trees above had an easier way into the hall coming through the large bay window at either end.

There was another floor above, but he suspected it was only attic space, as the stairs going up terminated in a closed dark oak door. Andy was content enough to explore this floor, expecting that he might find the old man's bedroom. Seeing that would give him some idea if the old man had just started squatting the building as he found it, the Line Man was just the weird caretaker, or, and this seemed inconceivable, he might even be the actual owner.

Each door that he walked past Andy would try, but all of them seemed locked. They had probably been locked when the house had been closed up and vacated, however, many years ago. But he was still confident that one of them would open in the Line Man's living quarters here. Quickly it just became repetitive and automatic to try the doors, and it was when he least expected it now, that one of the doors clicked open!

He lightly pushed the door open. The room inside was inky dark, obviously, the curtains to it were drawn closed. Andy could just make out the outline of a large four poster bed, a dresser, and a nightstand in the gloom. The dresser only because it was close to the door he'd just swung open.

Now, he tried to remember if he had seen a lamp at all downstairs, or if he could find a light switch in here. He groped around hopelessly in the gloom, hoping against hope for a switch

to come to his hand. The doorway let in light to the room, but the musty gloom inside seemed to swallow it up.

Andy turned to go back downstairs to look for a lamp when he heard the front door click open again! It was followed by sure and confident footsteps coming inside, not someone sneaking in as Andy had, but the measured easy tread of someone who belonged here! The Line Man was back already!

Andy went quickly and as quietly as he could to the large window at the end of the hall and looked out hoping to escape. No good at all! It was a sheer drop to the ground from here! Maybe he could find something behind the drapes in the room that was open! He stepped back into that room while still trying desperately to not let the floorboards creak from his weight.

That's when he heard the cracked elderly voice yell from below, "COME ON OUT BOY! I KNOW YOU'RE HERE!"

Andy froze. He had no idea what to do! The old man hadn't actually SEEN him yet unless he'd doubled back and had been coming behind him the whole time. Maybe it was actually the police? Maybe they'd seen him park, and decided to follow him out here? But the voice seemed old and not like one of the young jarheads that counted as the local police force here, those were state police and not locals anyway.

"Come on down boy, and take your medicine!" the voice called from the bottom of the steps again, "I know you're there, and you know I'm between you and the door, no point in dragging things out! I don't intend to hurt you none!"

Well there it was, there was only one open room he'd been able to find, and it was pitch dark, and probably the old man's own bedroom. Most importantly, the old man was at the stairs, between him, and the door. His shoulders slumped, and he turned and walked back down the hall. It was just an old man, how bad could it be?

As he got to the top of the stairs, he looked down into the sunken shining eyes of the Line Man, staring straight up the stairs at him from beneath his hood. "Oh, it's you! I wasn't sure, I thought it might be some local rascals intruding on my home and hearth. Well, you might as well get down here, and save me having to go up after ye!" he cackled, grinning at Andy.

Andy had no choice. He slowly made his way down the stairs to where the old man waited. The old man's face was split into an insane look of glee, but he made no move that seemed to be a threat. Andy could see no weapon on the old man that might be used to ward off an invader upon his home. It didn't matter, though, every step down the stairs filled Andy with dread! A little boy dread, that even adult men have the moment they've been caught going about the mischief that lies in the little boy nature of all men.

When he finally reached the ground floor, the old man looked him in the eye and said, "I couldn't be sure, but now I am. Your mother was a Hypes, was she not?"

"What? Umm yeah, I think that's right, why? I mean I'm sorry I broke into your house... well not broke, I mean the door was open," Andy stammered.



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## THE LEGEND OF THE JOINT SNAKE by Mathias Jansson

A rusty key waiting  
for a lock in need of oil  
a creaking door  
with secret symbols  
revealing steep stairs  
that fill me with fear  
leading into a dark abyss

I descend with a feeling  
of falling into certain death  
but finally I reach the bottom  
a chamber of limestone  
with seven cells  
and in the silence  
I hear a disturbing noise

My torch reveals  
a decapitated head  
on the cell floor  
with red burning eyes  
and a whispering tongue

-Set me free  
from this prison  
of lead and silver  
my brother betrayed me  
he dismembered me  
in seven pieces  
imprisoned me  
for an eternity  
but I promise you  
gold and prosperity  
if you will release me

With his mesmerising voice  
he commands me:  
-Set me free  
and you will see  
your dreams come true  
open seven gates  
and I will rise again  
assemble like a joint snake  
in the eye of Horus

Like in a dream  
I open the gates  
and seven limbs  
crawl out from the dark  
I can see him raising  
from the burning floor  
Osiris the new-born king  
of the underworld

Burning with rage  
he leaves his prison  
to seek revenge  
on his brother Set

Sixty years have passed  
and old age and sickness  
have embraced me  
I am still waiting for him to return  
to fulfil his promises  
but I realize  
sixty years is a lifetime for a man  
but only a second for an eternal God.

THE END

SUMMER 2017

# Schlock!

## Quarterly

Includes Two  
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Sword and  
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### THOUGHTS DURING THE STORM

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Plus Four More Stories  
and Poems from  
the thrilling pages of  
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## THE HETTFORD WITCH HUNT by Oafish J Rhodes

### Episode Three: The Road to Damascus is Paved with Good Intentions

01.

Gary checked the contents of his plastic bag, chocolate, and wine. He ran through the words in his mind, “Look, I didn’t mean for this to happen. It’s just...”

He didn’t have a follow up to the statement, his experience with women mostly amounting to Alison, Gary had begun to take it for granted that he would never need to construct a full sentence without being interrupted.

He walked along the privet row towards the house of a girl he had recently kissed, not entirely sure what his motives were for going but assuring himself they were honourable.

Taking a deep courageous breath, Gary reached his hand up and knocked on the door. The door swung open and there on the other side was a rotund man with a thick black beard.

“Dan,” Gary observed.

“You’re too late to be any help,” Dan observed.

There was the sound of footsteps and from behind Dan’s large frame, Gary could see Julie’s tight clad knees descending the stairs. She pushed Dan to one side.

“Sorry,” she said, “I think this morning is cancelled, the house is on the blink again.”

“You might as well go home,” said Dan, “too many of us here already. We don’t need any other energies in the house.”

“I’d hardly call myself an energy,” said Gary, “unless exhaustion counts as energetic.”

“Exactly,” said Dan.

Julie pushed Dan to one side and smiled. Gary’s eyes widened at the sight of her.

“You look great,” said Gary, “your neck is totally better.”

“Must be the antibiotics,” said Julie.

“You look very tired,” said Dan, “You better get home for some rest.”

Gary’s bloodshot eyes made a silent appeal to Julie.

“You do look tired,” she told him, “and it’s pretty busy in here today anyway.”

Gary smiled in what to Julie looked like understanding patience but to himself felt like relief.

02.

Gary rubbed his eyes as he fumbled repeatedly to remove his key from his pocket. Yawning, he stabbed with vague purpose in the effort to unlock his front door. On his fifth attempt he managed to manipulate the key into the keyhole and the door swung open, propelled by the weight of his exhausted body.

He took another deep yawn, stretched his shoulders, and walked to the kitchen.

Mrs Fuller was sat at the table with Shelley. Shelley was wearing her dressing gown and an expression of consternation.

“Joan is here to help you get ready for your interview,” Shelley announced.

Gary managed to arrange his face into an expression of gratitude whilst his body conceded defeat and his shoulders collapsed into a sullen slump.

“Thanks,” he said, “how did you know?”

“Alison called and asked if I could help.”

Gary looked over to Shelley, Shelley mouthed the word “sorry” at him.

“I’ll just get a coffee, shall I?” Gary asked.

03.

The nearest library to Hettford (that had no danger of Dan being in it) was a short drive away at Shackleford. It was a grey brutalist affair sculpted entirely from concrete and as a desire to keep costs to a minimum.

The inside of it did little to counter the exterior façade of pragmatic simplicity as row after row of metal shelves aligned themselves like tin soldiers preparing to battle with the entire concept of aesthetics.

Yes, posters had been put up to counter the effect, displays had been lovingly crafted to sit atop of the shelves and get people excited about reading; however they did not manage to brighten the place up any more than laying a wreath of flowers on a coffin brightens up a funeral.

What the Shackleford Library did boast however was an impressive collection of 1970s microfiche of old records of the surrounding villages. Carrie was finding them all deeply fascinating. She was more used to internet research and so was able to enjoy the research for its methodology alone.

She had found the archive for Hettford births and managed to find a reference index for the village church. She didn’t have an exact year for either of the sisters births she decided to practice on an easier target. Pulling up the cards for the year of Gary’s birth, Shelley began to scan through the slides. The slides moved on in chronological order, the baptisms were often weeks apart and so it was not a chore to flick through them. She soon came upon the slide

that should have held Gary's details. The slide read simply, "Record held by church, please consult vicar if this is you."

"Interesting," said Shelley aloud.

She began to formulate her approach as she trawled with a similar lack of success for the Bellows sisters.

04.

Gary's eyes were stretched as wide as he could get them. Mrs Fuller seemed oblivious to his obvious exhaustion.

"You see, it's all about preparation. People don't realise how much preparation goes into teaching."

"Preparation," Gary repeated.

"So, say you have a class full of 30 children and one of them speaks Polish. How are you going to make sure that the Polish speaker can access Chaucer as well as the rest?"

Gary took a long swig of his coffee, the bile in his throat was rising and the sensation of artificial wakefulness was causing him to feel nauseous.

"Do the Miller's Tale?" Gary suggested.

"Not quite, you're going to have to plan resources that let that child access what you are doing."

"OK," said Gary.

"So how would you differentiate for a Polish speaking child?"

Gary tried to hide his yawn breathing deeply through his nostrils.

"Learn to speak Polish?" He suggested.

"No, no, no, nothing that hard. Have a look at this."

Mrs Fuller pulled a large folder out of her bag and as she opened it, Gary was hit with the idea that it was going to be a very, very long morning.

05.

The radio was the only audible sound at the Discount News Newsagents. Paul had been left to look after the shop which, Tajel told him, would help him prepare to apply for a job as assistant manager.

There had been a rush on papers in the morning and then one on milk only slightly after that. However, for the last half an hour no customers had visited and Paul was sure that if he tried to read his book, someone would instantly barge through the door to interrupt him.

He was reluctant to even sit down. Ideally, he would have liked to go and make a cup of tea but Tajel had left him in a position of responsibility and he was not about to betray that trust. No matter who she'd gone to visit.

He opted to do a quick check of the shelves and make sure all the displays looked good.

Walking out in to the aisle of the shop, Paul fancied that he heard something moving.

The refrigerated drinks cabinet had made plenty of noises that had scared him in the past. It had the habit of making knocking sounds that sounded eerily like footsteps. However, that was not the sound he heard. This sound was the definite clank of solid object against solid object.

Paul took a deep breath; his nerves were jarred but his brain was sending a clear message to them all to relax. Then came the rumbling, quiet at first, then louder and louder as if it were growing ever closer.

Paul's eyes glanced up at the ceiling as if to check some giant monster was not descending from there to destroy him.

As he lowered his eyes Paul was still unable to locate the source of the mysterious sound. Finally and in desperate befuddlement, Paul glanced down at his feet. Lying only an inch away from his store brand trainers was a can of Energy. The label read Industrial: Run Off This. Paul looked over at the giant fridge, neatly stacked and properly stocked. He looked down at the can again and then couldn't help but glance over his shoulder.

06.

Gary looked at the huge pile of paperwork that Mrs Fuller had left to help him "prepare" for his interview. He took a deep breath and attempted to read through it.

He could feel the caffeine coursing through his blood stream and into the neurons that facilitate concentration like a colony of hectic ants. Gary found himself unable to keep track of the words that were in front of him.

"Bollocks," he said.

Impatiently, he stood up and went to look in the fridge for a beer to help him relax. There was nothing there. In his cupboard was a small drop of gin that he took straight from the bottle. The drive to sleep was insurmountable, Gary opened Shelley's cupboard. She generally had vodka, which though he didn't enjoy, was within his price range to replace and might just do the trick.

The plywood door swung open to reveal more plywood shelves, each of them holding dried food with wholesome sounding names like quinoa and milled linseed.



Gary sighed and realised that he would have to remain awake a little while longer. He put on his shoes and headed out of the house.

07.

Julie was upstairs, Dan and Milton stared at the fruit bowl as if looking at it any longer than they already had might suddenly unveil some hidden knowledge that was lying quietly behind the medium density plywood that supported it.

“I think the spirit well is the whole house,” said Dan, “I think a witch opened it.”

“It would have to be a pretty long-lasting spell,” said Milton.

“Or not because maybe Gary cast a spell so he can see her naked or something.”

“I think Gary has already seen her naked and I don’t think he’d need a spell to see it again.”

“Well, what if he doesn’t know he’s doing it?”

“And what if a passing bird happened to drop a spirit well out of its ass. Are we even sure that they exist anyway?”

“Look, I didn’t want to say anything but the other day I found a newspaper article about a benefit cheat called Henry Turlough who had eleven children.”

“So what?”

“So Gary was number seven,” Dan told him.

“That proves nothing.”

“So what if Henry Turlough is also son number seven, that makes Gary a natural wizard.”

“Perhaps if we lived in an Iron Maiden song it would,” said Milton.

“No, in reality. Look at Julie’s neck.”

Dan raised his palms in the air as if he had conclusively proved his point.

“What about it?”

“It cleared up, how much do you want to bet that he kissed her on it?”

“Are you going to ask because I’m bloody not.”

“I might do, it’s pretty important.”

“It’s bullshit.”

“I checked the birth marriage and death records,” Dan told him, “Gary is definitely number seven.”

“The chances of this are pretty slim.”

“Not around Hettford they’re not. Throw a stone and you’ll hit some unlikely genetic flaw. It comes with the lack of migration and job opportunities.”

“A stilted economy is very different to host of children being born as wizards.”

“Not a host,” said Dan, “Just one. Gary.”

A noise from upstairs, the sound of a footstep on a creaky step. Signified the end of that particular conversation.

08.

Shelley walked into the church. The minimalist architecture of the building did not detract from the craftsmanship of its masonry; neat grey stone pillars supported antique wooden beams. The acoustics of the chapel magnified the simple act of pushing open the door.

Shelley took a deep inhalation and that echoed around the room too. She glanced around, half hoping to find the building empty.

The vicar approached, in his full vicar regalia, his dark hair was beginning to thin at the hairline but other than that he had changed very little since the last time she had seen him.

“Good day my dear and how is your husband?”

Shelley had to think for a second, then she had to suppress the twitch of a smile.

“He’s fine,” she told him, “we just seem to get closer and closer.”

“Well, that’s very reassuring to hear. I haven’t seen you in mass for a while.”

“I’ve been away doing research most Sundays. I’ve been going to a church near the college.”

The lie dropped as easily from Shelley’s mouth as if it had been rehearsed, which it had. She was expecting that particular hurdle.

“I was just wondering if I’d be able to get a look at the baptism record for my husband. We’re trying to track his father down. Also, as I’m here, I was wondering if you might have any information about the famous Bellows sisters.”

The vicar scratched his chin as if he were attempting to remember any other duties he might be able to attend before getting to either of Shelley’s requests.

He nodded and then shook his head, as if he were having some kind of internal debate.

“I’m afraid all records prior to my arrival are missing. They were last checked out by a man of the name Mr M Burroughs who seems to have purchased them. From what I can make out, it is the reason the church still has a roof.”

“Ah,” said Shelley, “Interesting.”

“Indeed,” agreed the vicar, “but not terribly helpful I’m afraid.”

Shelley smiled.

“It’s helpful enough,” she told him.

“I do have record of the Bellows sisters though, they’re photocopies but they might do.”

“Really?”

Shelley’s smile was so wide it could have won over the most cold hearted and desolate ghoul in the industrial sector. To a well-meaning village vicar, it was near atomic.

09.

Dan and Milton were both talking with their hands to illustrate the science of spirit wells. Dan was making a waving motion to signify radius and Milton was actively explaining the inference of Dan’s movements whilst adding his own impromptu actions. In short, they were bullshitting their way through it.

“We can’t be sure of the impact it will have,” said Milton, “it could be the fruit bowl, it could be the whole kitchen.”

“Or,” added Dan, “it might be the whole house.”

“We don’t know, is the long and short of it,” Milton concluded.

“What we do know is...”

“It’s not safe.” Milton finished.

“Not at all safe,” Dan confirmed.

“So, we recommend you try to find somewhere else to sleep whilst we find out exactly how bad it is.”

Milton pursed his lips and nodded in what he hoped was a combination of assuring sympathy, sincere apology and an indication of his perceived gravitas of the situation.

“I can’t just find somewhere,” she said, “I’m not exactly rich.”

“Family member,” suggested Milton.

“Boyfriend,” Dan chipped in.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Julie told them.

“It would be for the best.”

Julie escorted the two men to her front door whilst her mind tried to juggle the mental preparation for begging and packing (two tasks no person should be asked to perform within 48 hours of each other) within the next hour and the idea that she might just stay where she was and see how things go.

Dan and Milton stepped out of her front door. Each of them was instantly knocked to the ground by the force of flying red wine bottle. They rubbed their heads and moaned loudly.

“This is exactly the sort of thing we were talking about,” said Milton.

“At least the bottles are still intact,” Dan observed.

“You can keep them,” said Julie, “as a thanks.”

“Thanks,” said Milton.

Even he wasn’t sure if he was being ironic.

10.

Gary ambled about the Discount News Newsagents as if it were the grass plains of early Pangaea, a veritable Eden of alcoholic distraction. Eventually he settled for something he could actually afford and took an off-brand bottle of bourbon unto the counter.

Paul glanced furtively about as Gary reached the counter. When he was sure that there was no-one else around he blossomed into a welcoming smile.

“Am I glad to see you?” Paul smiled.

Gary checked the still air to see whether or not Paul had included a question mark in the sentence. Satisfied that it was a statement and not a question Gary realised he was stumped either way and tried to shrug in a nonchalant manner.

“Anything in particular?” Gary asked.

“Yeah mate, I’ve messed up. I mean even by my standards, I’ve messed up.”

“Perhaps by yours but probably not by mine,” said Gary, “What have you done?”

Paul paused and glanced around a second time. Tajel was out so he didn’t have to worry about her overhearing him. It was other customers that mainly concerned him.

“You know how I’ve been getting into Thorny Crowns?”

“Yes.”

Gary thought back to an incident in which Paul had caused a bit of a stir in a long robe and roller-skates.

“And you know how I like the wizard?”

Gary nodded.

“Well, I bought a book of spells from your mate and I’ve been trying a few of them out.”

“On Tajel?”

Paul looked shocked.

“No, nothing like that.”

“OK, so then what?”

“I tried to summon the spirit of Saul to talk to. I miss him.”

Gary pursed his lips uncomfortably. Paul carried on speaking.

“Anyway, I tried a spell to talk to him and it didn’t seem to work, don’t tell anyone about this... Right?”

“Right.”

“Anyway, I tried the spell and nothing happened. But since then, weird stuff has been happening. The shelves fell down on their own, a can of Saul’s favourite drink dropped out of the fridge and rolled five feet in my direction and when the shelves fell down I found an old note in Saul’s handwriting. I’m really freaked out.”

It was Gary’s turn to glance about and hope that no-one was looking. He thought back to the note that Alison had shown him after she had been in Julie’s house. He wasn’t entirely comfortable with the idea of a spectral Saul running around the village.

“Which spell book did you use?” Gary asked.

“Merlin’s Book of Magic,” Paul replied.

Gary smiled, a look of relief crossing his face.

“Thank God, don’t worry mate, that one is complete bollocks. Whatever is going on is not your fault.”

Paul nodded, appreciatively. Then he looked slightly indignant.

“Milton told me that was a good one.”

“Milton likes to play on words, his definition of good when it comes to magic is probably a bit different to yours.”

“I was enjoying that too, until I thought it had worked.”

“Trust me, the ones Milton has that actually work are well outside of our price range.”

Paul nodded.

“Thanks mate.”

He undercharged Gary for the bourbon as a sign of his appreciation. Then when Gary had left the shop and he was sure no-one was looking he put the difference into the till from his own pocket, so Tajel wouldn't be mad at him.

11.

A plate of biscuits sat in the centre of the table. Dan had lain out a large piece of paper which he had given the title, plan of attack. He had written the words in fountain pen and rendered them in his finest calligraphy. Next to it he had drawn a picture of a large breasted Shakespeare wearing a dress to signify Julie.

“This is an hour's work?” Milton enquired.

“I had to make the tea as well and put the biscuits out. Anyway, what have you come up with that's so great?”

“I...”

Milton raised his eyebrows.

“I've got nothing either. I don't buy the idea of spirit wells, I think we may have just come up with that so we didn't look stupid.”

“It's a brilliant idea,” said Dan, “really convincing.”

“Certainly better than fairies.”

“I think we can both agree that it is something more sensible than either of those things.”

“Witches,” agreed Milton.

“Witches, we get rid of the witches and we are left with less possibilities.”

Milton nodded vigorously for a second and then narrowed his eyes.

“You're talking about the Bellows sisters, right?”

“Yes, who else.”

Milton shrugged.

“I’m just recalling recent conversations.”

“We’ll deal with Gary when we’re sure.”

“Good because I’m not even iffy yet, let alone anything close to sure.”

“I am willing to bet he is the seventh son of a seventh son. That could be why the witches are getting more powerful, they’re tapping in to his potential energy.”

Milton scratched his chin in deep meditation as if he were sucking a lozenge made entirely from complex differential equations.

“If he is really a natural wizard, maybe we should be using him. He could probably snap his fingers at the sisters and they’d go away. There hasn’t been a practising seventh son since...”

Milton tried to think of someone. As he did so, he noticed Dan was opening his mouth to butt in.

“Chuff knows when,” Milton finished.

“That’s not a sensible solution,” Dan was using his most measured tone of voice.

“And why not? You and I have never had any luck with them. Our fathers never had any luck with them, your entire family history dating back two centuries can basically be summarised with phrase didn’t have any luck getting rid of the witches.”

“That doesn’t mean, fire up a powerful witch and let him run riot around town. You don’t solve the palm oil crisis by giving a machine gun to an orang-utan.”

“What?” asked Milton.

“Orang-utans can’t use machine guns Milton,” said Dan, “They just can’t.”

“So what? We should boycott certain brands of crisps and moisturisers and hope the witches find a different source of oil?”

“Exactly,” said Dan, “that is exactly what we should do.”

“We don’t buy moisturiser,” Milton’s voice was brimming with despair and frustration.

“We buy crisps,” said Dan.

“How does any of this get rid of the witches?”

“We get rid of them, triangulate their location with milk and burn them out. Then we’ll know if we have a palm oil crisis on our hands.”

“There is a palm oil crisis,” said Milton, “it’s just in no way analogous with witches.”

“Witches are bad and so is industrialised palm oil production.”

“OK,” said Milton, “let’s not buy any more crisps.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it!”

“That what did you mean?”

It was the wrong question to ask Dan at that point and the answer took much longer than Milton would have expected.

12.

“Where have you been?”

Gary looked over to Shelley, who was sat sipping hot coffee at the kitchen table. Gary held aloft his bottle of bourbon and waved it from side to side.

“I couldn’t sleep, too many stimulants. Needed the antidote.”

“Well, don’t sleep now I’ve got good news for you.”

“Which is?”

“I found the baptism records for the Bellows sisters and Sarah Bellows was baptised in June.”

Gary tried not to look completely blank but failed with gusto.

“Which means,” said Shelley, “we can bind one of them on Midsummer’s eve. So, if she’s the one who has you trapped in the village, there’s a fifty-fifty chance you’ll be able to get to your job interview.”

“Hurray,” said Gary.

He began to pour bourbon into a ceramic mug.

“Thank you,” he added, “You shouldn’t be wasting your time on me.”

“It’s not a waste,” said Shelley, “I’m not going to stay in the village forever, just till my thesis is written.”

“Of course,” said Gary, “so?”

“So neither should you.”

Gary drank his bourbon and poured himself a second generous measure.

“Let’s celebrate upstairs,” Shelley said to him.



Gary hesitated for a second and then drank the rest of his cup. He followed Shelley up towards the bedroom.

13.

Julie was sat at the end of her bed; her bag was fully packed with the various essentials and essential oils that she felt would be necessary for a short trip away.

She had tried calling her mother earlier in the day but not managed to get through. She picked up the phone next to her bed and her finger hovered for a moment as she garnered the courage to make the call.

The keypad beeped noisily over a gentle sigh and Julie finished dialling the number. Her mother's phone began to ring.

A click on the other end of the line signified that the call had been answered for a second, Julie heard her mother's voice say "hello."

The sound of her mother was replaced by a sudden burst of high pitched static. Julie yanked the phone away from her ear as the noise reached an uncomfortable frequency.

She heard her bedroom door creak. It slammed shut. Julie turned to look at it, there was nothing to have caused the slam. She stumbled over the bed and pulled at the handle. There was no lock on the door but it was firmly shut, it could not be opened no matter how she heaved against the brass fitted handle. Julie placed one leg on the wall to create extra force but it was to no avail, the door simply would not shift.

Glancing around the room in panic, Julie's eyes fell upon the phone, still screaming at her in a static pitch.

She slammed down the receiver and held it there, trying to recapture some sense of control over her surroundings. Then she lifted it to hear the same long shrill keening sound. The tone raised in pitch, higher and higher until it popped and went dead. Julie looked down at it in horror and amazement. She ran back to the door and tried the handle one more time. Then she slumped to the ground with her back against it, reached out with her left hand and yanked the blankets from her bed, swaddling herself in them as if they the only solution to the situation in which she found herself.

14.

There was a cobweb on the light on Gary's ceiling, he had never previously noticed it. As he lay with Shelley's head curled into his shoulder it was the only thing left in the world he could focus on, his eyes were ready to sleep, his body was ready to sleep but sleep continued to evade him even in a post-coital state that almost universally guaranteed a swift transition to the land of nod for Gary.

Shelley's hand was rubbing his chest, over and over again.

"You're an odd one," she told him.

“So I hear,” he said.

“A real mystery.”

“Hmm,” said Gary.

It was not a conversation he felt especially willing to run with. He had been called odd so many times throughout his life that it hardly registered with him. He remembered that in his relationship with Alison the linguistics had slowly transitioned from mysterious to socially awkward. Anyway, she was the one doing a Ph.D. in witchcraft.

“You’re the one doing a Ph.D. in witchcraft,” he told her.

“The history of witchcraft,” she told him.

“Anyway,” she added, “I’ve started to think I should have written it on you.”

Gary could feel his body tense up at the level of attention he was getting from Shelley.

“Studies of a low-key no mark,” he suggested.

“Did you know that your friend Milton has all of the churches records?”

“Milton will buy anything that he thinks will help with the hunt.”

“He has your baptism record.”

“Well then, he’s taken more of an interest in it than I have.”

“Yes but he has the only record of your baptism. The library microfiche of it says to request it directly from the vicar.”

“Why are you looking at my baptism record?”

“I was practising to try and find the Bellows girls, I’d never used microfiche before.”

“How do you know my date of birth?”

“I know how old you are, I know what month your birthday is and I know what year this is. It’s not a difficult riddle to solve. Why are you asking so many questions?”

“I’m not, just wondering how you knew,” Gary said.

“I might be stalking you I suppose, it would be a bit weird though as I already know where you are all the time and we’re already sleeping together. Maybe I’ll cut some of your hair off while you sleep, you never know.”

“Don’t say things like that unless you’re a trained barber,” said Gary.

“Your pubic hair, I might clip it off and put it in my file with all my other victims.”

Gary was suddenly very awake. He looked down at Shelley in distress. Her face was a broad charming smile.

“You’re hopeless as well as mysterious,” she giggled, “no wonder you have relationship problems. I’m just trying to help.”

“I know,” said Gary, “I’m just too tired to get jokes or subtlety.”

“Go to sleep then,” she told him.

Shelley cuddled in a little more and stroked his chest. As he closed his eyes the thought going through his head was “here we go again.”

15.

Having feared the worst was about to happen for nearly an hour, Julie was emotionally exhausted but ready to accept that she wasn’t in any immediate danger. She stood and tried the handle of her door a final time but found it firmly locked.

Going to her white plywood wardrobe, she pulled down the thin steel rail that held up the array of black and purple clothing that she owned, letting the garments fall helplessly to the floor.

Julie took the steel rail to the door and tried to pry it open using the clothes rail. The steel bent as she pushed her weight against it. Nevertheless the door refused to shift. Julie looked around her room for anything else that might be of use. Her eyes fell on her dresser, looking for a pair of tweezers or anything else that might enable her to unscrew the lock. After the tweezers broke on the first attempt she tried a pair of scissors and managed, slowly and tediously, to turn the screw in the lock.

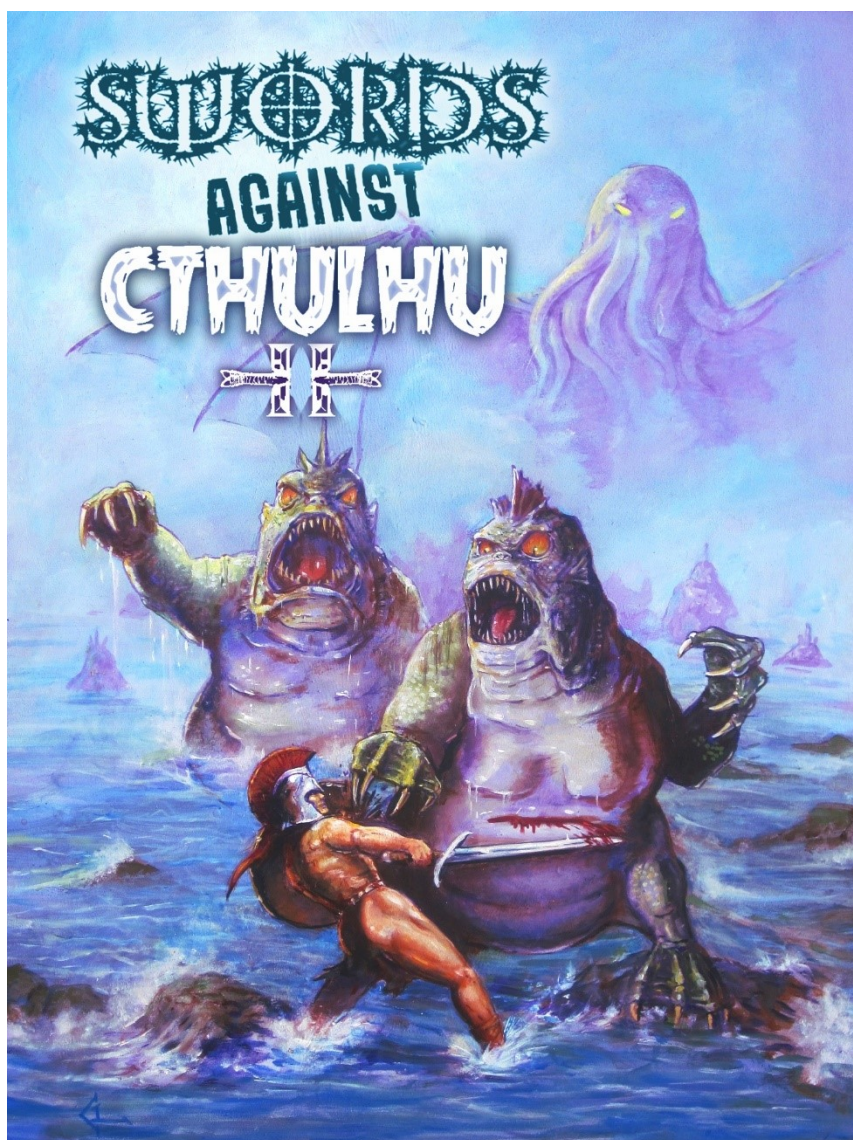
It was not quick but Julie maintained her effort until the screws that held the door handle in fell out, one by one. Julie, removed the handle’s plate and pushed the lock mechanism through to the other side.

Despite her effort and there being no physical barrier to the door’s opening, it refused to shift.

Julie’s eyes fell on the dresser one more time. She picked up a dark red tube of lipstick and on the window of her bedroom wrote the single word, “HELP” in block capitals.

It was already getting dark outside, orange street lights flickered reluctantly to illuminate the small empty road but any hope was better than none.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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## THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO by Gregory KH Bryant

### Episode Twenty-Three

The “Grand Marquis” broke in half.

Ceaseless barrages from the “Bellerophon” finally ripped it through the middle where the huge Landing Bays were located, tearing the huge ship in two. The stern came crashing upon the “Bellerophon”. Burning pieces of screaming metal rained down upon the ship and the vast icy plains of Callisto, below.

The battle between the three huge ships, the “Grand Marquis”, the “Bellerophon” and the “Reliant” took place in a series of vast, elliptical, and looping orbits around Callisto. At nearest approach, the great ships were but half a mile above the surface of the moon. They skimmed low above the rolling hills of ice, and the ancient cratered plains. During these moments, the “Bellerophon” was squeezed between the vast frozen deserts of Callisto, and the ships that pursued it.

Continuing in its elliptical orbit, the “Bellerophon” leaped into the illimitable reaches of space, for a distance of several hundred miles, with both the “Grand Marquis” and the “Reliant” squeezing Colonel Westland’s ship between them.

And it was with the icy plains of Callisto racing beneath them that the heavy stern of the “Grand Marquis” came crashing down on the “Bellerophon”.

There were yet a dozen men and women in the stern of the “Grand Marquis”. They had been manning the plasma guns there, and they were yet alive when the broken parts of their ship beat down upon the hull of the “Bellerophon”.

The largest, heaviest pieces of the “Grand Marquis” missed the “Bellerophon” almost completely. Westland’s quickly intuited strategy had worked. Breaking the “Grand Marquis” in half caused a gap to emerge between the two pieces of the ship that came crashing down. The “Bellerophon” found itself happily in the very middle of that gap.

But the “Bellerophon” did not escape unscathed. It had merely dodged the largest sections of the broken ship. But yet many tons of burning metal came crashing down upon its hull. Broken bulkheads, pipes, vast electrical assemblies, and more, all came hurtling in a hellish rain on the ship. Huge holes ripped into the outer skin of the “Bellerophon”. Clouds of sparks danced from thickets of snapping wires, oxygen escaped the wounded ships in huge geysers.

Tu Hit, pilot of the “Grand Marquis” remained steadfast at the wheel. When the last third of the ship had been torn away, Tu Hit saw it through the dimmed visiscreens that were still operational.

Throughout the battered and smouldering wreckage that had been the bridge of the “Grand Marquis”, only two of the command centre’s visiscreens were still functioning. Of those, only one of them gave a view of the stern of the ship as it broke away from the bow. As it was, the

image was scattered and shaky. Static scrambled the image, and it was with difficulty that Tu Hit could understand what the screens were showing him.

A heavy section of the ruined Landing Bay of the ship dealt the “Bellerophon” a glancing blow as it fell. The blow ripped a huge gash into the third pod of the ship. Several dozen crewmen were hurled from the gash. Their bodies sailed through the sky above the frozen Callistoan deserts, forced by the blast into long arcs that led them into long looping orbits around Callisto.

The sudden loss of air through the third pod was catastrophic. It had to be stopped, instantly, or every living thing upon the “Bellerophon” would die within minutes.

Westland did not hesitate. He gave the order. He shut the third pod down. The torrential loss of air throughout the “Bellerophon” was staunch.

Those who were still within the third pod, who had not been sucked out into space, and who had not time to evacuate, suffocated to death at their posts. Some twenty of them.

But the “Bellerophon” was saved.

Westland pulled the “Bellerophon” about and away from the still-struggling remains of the bow of the ship, where Tu Hit still fought with the controls. Now the last surviving crewman upon the ruins of the “Grand Marquis”, he worked hard upon the ship’s controls. He moved through the smouldering bridge with astonishing dexterity and speed to determine which controls were still operational, even as the bow of the ruined ship began its last long tumble down toward icy oblivion.

For a moment, it seemed as if the battle surrounding the “Bellerophon” came to a stop. Every pilot in every fighter ship paused, and stared at the majestic plunge of the remnants of the “Grand Marquis” as it hurtled downward.

And it crashed upon the cold Callistoan desert. From a height of half a mile it came crashing down. It bounced and shattered across the frozen plains, leaving long trails of smouldering wreckage in its wake.

Its heavy components seemed to simply splash away, as if they had liquefied upon striking the frozen plains. Large pieces of bulkhead and deck shattered into tiny fragments that went skittering across the ice. A dozen small mushroom clouds rose from the many places where the hulk of the “Grand Marquis” crashed. They were quickly extinguished in the near vacuum of Callisto. The smoke of hundreds of chemical fires burst from the explosions that rocked both the ruined ship and deserts surrounding.

Even the icy desert itself was wounded in the crash. Titanic shock waves shot through the ice for many hundreds of miles. Huge cracks opened up, sudden canyons many dozens of feet deep. The crash itself appeared as a huge wound in the ice, a deep crater, charred and bloody. Where the heat of the crash and the explosions were most intense, the ice of the Callistoan deserts exploded into steam that rose in huge billows that could be seen even from beyond the horizon

The Scroungers who had deployed from the “Grand Marquis” watched the ship’s death in silent, unutterable horror. Their ship was gone. Was it also so, their captain?

For them, the battle against the “Bellerophon” was over. They had to find some place to land their ships, and soon, too. For the small fighter craft launched from the flight deck of the “Grand Marquis” were not built for interplanetary flight. They could not make those distances. Those fighters and those gunners aboard these ships were suddenly confronted with a new problem: how to find interplanetary transports that would take them on.

The “Reliant” was not such a ship. It had no flight deck, no accommodations for a fleet of small fighter craft. Yamir would certainly be happy to take on any hands that sought to ship with him, but he had no use for the fighter craft. Those pilots would have to find their way to the “Reliant” without their ships.

The largest numbers of their compatriots had already made their way to Callisto Base 1, where the battle was only beginning. So it was that the Scroungers in their small one and two-person fighter craft peeled away from the fight surrounding the “Bellerophon”, swiftly making their course to Callisto Base 1.

Illara saw it all. As the three huge ships looped high in the sky over Callisto, then plunged downward again, skirting above the moon at only a half mile above the surface. She saw it when the “Grand Marquis” broke in half. She saw the huge wreckage that rained down upon Callisto, only a few dozen miles from Callisto Base 1 itself. The huge cracks that opened up in the ice, and the massive shock waves that rolled across the deserts like vast surf—Illara saw all of it.

When the shock waves arrived at Callisto Base 1, they caused the colony to rise, and then drop, nearly a foot in both directions. The sorely taxed domes of the base groaned with the stress, and the steel girders that supported all the structures within shook from their foundations. Floors shuddered, walls trembled.

“Dang!” Illara cried out from her ship.

She turned her attention to Ward’s ship, the O8-111A. It was only just then settling in through the plasma walls of the space port of Callisto Base 1. Mud’s ship, the “Charon”, followed close behind.

Illara followed, even as dozens of ships piloted by the Scroungers were also converging there.

Only scant seconds after Ward and Mud had brought their ships into the space port, Illara, still hotly pursued, arrived. She brought her ship, ‘Izzy’ through the purple-tinted plasma wall, landed, and locked her ship down. No one but she would be able to move ‘Izzy’.

She stepped out of ‘Izzy’, pulling off her helmet and tossing it into the cockpit, and she looked about.

There, at the far end of the Landing Bay, were the airlocks. An older technology, they were built to provide an extra bit of security for the colony against the endless vacuum of space.

Should the plasma walls of the Landing Bay ever falter, even for a moment, the colony itself would be safe behind the strictly mechanical and electrical airlocks. Solid stuff, solid protection.

The scene was chaotic. Across the tarmac were many dozens of ships, all landed without any apparent order. Scroungers, just arrived and pushing onward to conquer Callisto Base 1. Sporadic fire of laser pistols rang out, echoing throughout the hangar as the hopelessly outnumbered security forces fired futilely at them.

The Scroungers paid no attention to Illara. They were intent upon making their way through the airlocks to where the action was, down into the railway that led to the base. Illara looked further. The O8-111A? Where was it? And the “Charon”?

Ah. There they were. Halfway across the tarmac with seven or eight ships intervening. Ward had already leaped out of the O8-111A. And there was his friend, Mud, climbing out of his ship and running the length of it to catch up with Ward.

Illara began moving between the ships to catch up with Ward and Mud, keeping a wary eye for the Scroungers who were making their way through the inner airlocks to the railway that would take them to Callisto Base 1 itself.

Illara kept a sharp eye on Ward and Mud as she made her way between the ships. Ward was alert. Illara could feel his tension, even from this distance. He was on his knee, peering carefully around the corner of his ship.

A motion some yards away from Ward and Mud caught her eye. And then she saw them.

One man, nearly seven feet tall, with pale skin of icy whiteness, his body covered with tattoos and his flesh embedded with beads. The other was nearly as tall as the first, but where the first man was slim of build and moved with a sinister grace, this other man was gross in his manner as well as in his appearance.

His teeth were brown and broken, jagged things that were plain to see, even through the man’s thick and unkempt beard. A huge scar had gouged a deep canyon through his face, a diagonal gash that had cut through the bridge of his nose, leaving a gap there.

Illara, of course, recognized them both, instantly.

It was Turhan Mot, he with the icy skin and sinister gait. And him, Mokem Bet, the rude pig of a man. The man who had cut Carter’s throat on Interplanetary Station 3, the man who had threatened both Illara and Emily with a fate many times worse than death.

They, too, were slinking from ship to ship, unaware, it seemed to Illara, that they were being followed.

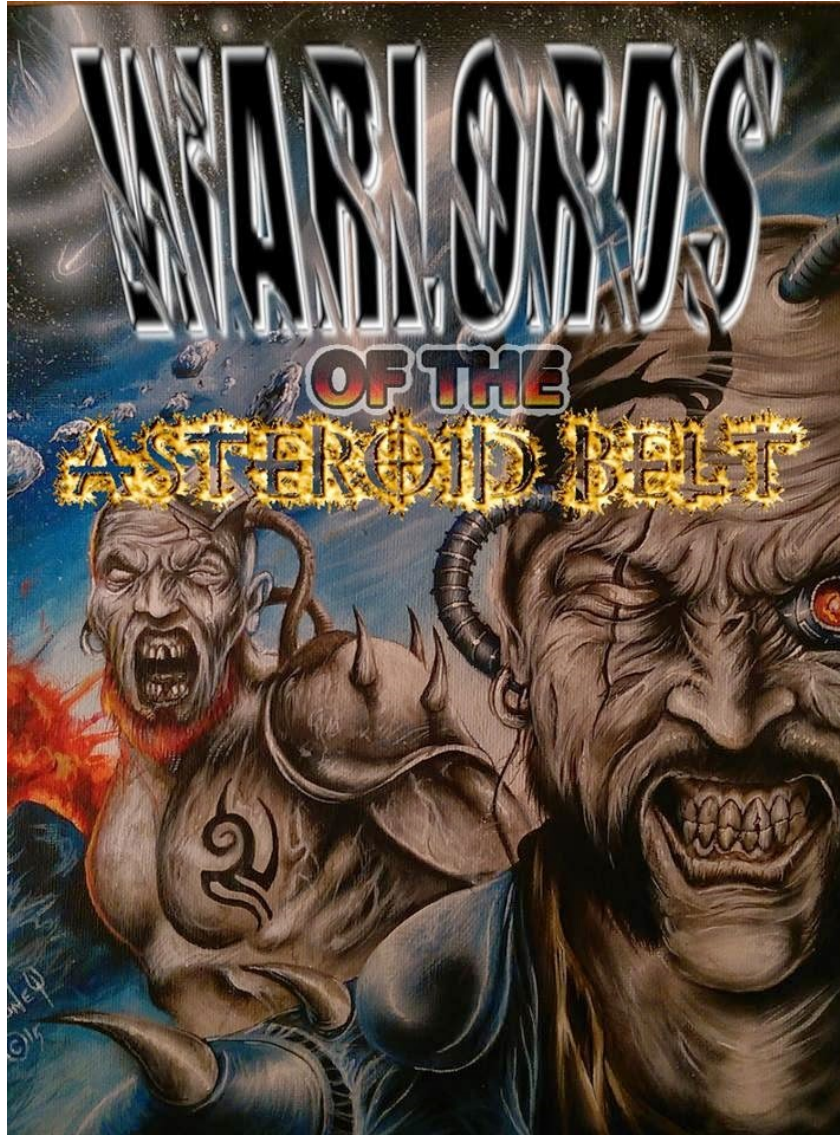
Illara glanced back to Ward and Mud. Mud had his laser pistol in hand.

Ward’s hand went to his hip. He unsheathed his combat knife, threaded his fingers into the holes on the handle. He gripped it tight.



CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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



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

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## THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND by Jules Verne

### Part 3. The Secret of the Island

#### Chapter 9

The convalescence of the young invalid was regularly progressing. One thing only was now to be desired, that his state would allow him to be brought to Granite House. However well-built and supplied the corral house was, it could not be so comfortable as the healthy granite dwelling. Besides, it did not offer the same security, and its tenants, notwithstanding their watchfulness, were here always in fear of some shot from the convicts. There, on the contrary, in the middle of that impregnable and inaccessible cliff, they would have nothing to fear, and any attack on their persons would certainly fail. They therefore waited impatiently for the moment when Herbert might be moved without danger from his wound, and they were determined to make this move, although the communication through Jacamar Wood was very difficult.

They had no news from Neb, but were not uneasy on that account. The courageous Negro, well entrenched in the depths of Granite House, would not allow himself to be surprised. Top had not been sent again to him, as it appeared useless to expose the faithful dog to some shot which might deprive the settlers of their most useful auxiliary.

They waited, therefore, although they were anxious to be reunited at Granite House. It pained the engineer to see his forces divided, for it gave great advantage to the pirates. Since Ayrton's disappearance they were only four against five, for Herbert could not yet be counted, and this was not the least care of the brave boy, who well understood the trouble of which he was the cause.

The question of knowing how, in their condition, they were to act against the pirates, was thoroughly discussed on the 29th of November by Cyrus Harding, Gideon Spilett, and Pencroft, at a moment when Herbert was asleep and could not hear them.

"My friends," said the reporter, after they had talked of Neb and of the impossibility of communicating with him, "I think, —like you, that to venture on the road to the corral would be to risk receiving a gunshot without being able to return it. But do you not think that the best thing to be done now is to openly give chase to these wretches?"

"That is just what I was thinking," answered Pencroft. "I believe we're not fellows to be afraid of a bullet, and as for me, if Captain Harding approves, I'm ready to dash into the forest! Why, hang it, one man is equal to another!"

"But is he equal to five?" asked the engineer.

"I will join Pencroft," said the reporter, "and both of us, well-armed and accompanied by Top—"

"My dear Spilett, and you, Pencroft," answered Harding, "let us reason coolly. If the convicts were hid in one spot of the island, if we knew that spot, and had only to dislodge them, I would undertake a direct attack; but is there not occasion to fear, on the contrary, that they are sure to fire the first shot?"

“Well, captain,” cried Pencroft, “a bullet does not always reach its mark.”

“That which struck Herbert did not miss, Pencroft,” replied the engineer. “Besides, observe that if both of you left the corral I should remain here alone to defend it. Do you imagine that the convicts will not see you leave it, that they will not allow you to enter the forest, and that they will not attack it during your absence, knowing that there is no one here but a wounded boy and a man?”

“You are right, captain,” replied Pencroft, his chest swelling with sullen anger. “You are right; they will do all they can to retake the corral, which they know to be well stored; and alone you could not hold it against them.”

“Oh, if we were only at Granite House!”

“If we were at Granite House,” answered the engineer, “the case would be very different. There I should not be afraid to leave Herbert with one, while the other three went to search the forests of the island. But we are at the corral, and it is best to stay here until we can leave it together.”

Cyrus Harding’s reasoning was unanswerable, and his companions understood it well.

“If only Ayrton was still one of us!” said Gideon Spilett. “Poor fellow! his return to social life will have been but of short duration.”

“If he is dead,” added Pencroft, in a peculiar tone.

“Do you hope, then, Pencroft, that the villains have spared him?” asked Gideon Spilett.

“Yes, if they had any interest in doing so.”

“What! you suppose that Ayrton finding his old companions, forgetting all that he owes us—”

“Who knows?” answered the sailor, who did not hazard this shameful supposition without hesitating.

“Pencroft,” said Harding, taking the sailor’s arm, “that is a wicked idea of yours, and you will distress me much if you persist in speaking thus. I will answer for Ayrton’s fidelity.”

“And I also,” added the reporter quickly.

“Yes, yes, captain, I was wrong,” replied Pencroft; “it was a wicked idea indeed that I had, and nothing justifies it. But what can I do? I’m not in my senses. This imprisonment in the corral wearies me horribly, and I have never felt so excited as I do now.”

“Be patient, Pencroft,” replied the engineer. “How long will it be, my dear Spilett, before you think Herbert may be carried to Granite House?”

“That is difficult to say, Cyrus,” answered the reporter, “for any imprudence might involve terrible consequences. But his convalescence is progressing, and if he continues to gain strength, in eight days from now—well, we shall see.”

Eight days! That would put off the return to Granite House until the first days of December. At this time two months of spring had already passed. The weather was fine, and the heat began to be great. The forests of the island were in full leaf, and the time was approaching when the usual crops ought to be gathered. The return to the plateau of Prospect Heights would, therefore, be followed by extensive agricultural labours, interrupted only by the projected expedition through the island.

It can, therefore, be well understood how injurious this seclusion in the corral must have been to the colonists.

But if they were compelled to bow before necessity, they did not do so without impatience.

Once or twice the reporter ventured out into the road and made the tour of the palisade. Top accompanied him, and Gideon Spilett, his gun cocked, was ready for any emergency.

He met with no misadventure and found no suspicious traces. His dog would have warned him of any danger, and, as Top did not bark, it might be concluded that there was nothing to fear at the moment at least, and that the convicts were occupied in another part of the island.

However, on his second sortie, on the 27th of November, Gideon Spilett, who had ventured a quarter of a mile into the woods, towards the south of the mountain, remarked that Top scented something. The dog had no longer his unconcerned manner; he went backwards and forwards, ferreting among the grass and bushes as if his smell had revealed some suspicious object to him.

Gideon Spilett followed Top, encouraged him, excited him by his voice, while keeping a sharp look-out, his gun ready to fire, and sheltering himself behind the trees. It was not probable that Top scented the presence of man, for in that case, he would have announced it by half-uttered, sullen, angry barks. Now, as he did not growl, it was because danger was neither near nor approaching.

Nearly five minutes passed thus, Top rummaging, the reporter following him prudently when, all at once, the dog rushed towards a thick bush, and drew out a rag.

It was a piece of cloth, stained and torn, which Spilett immediately brought back to the corral. There it was examined by the colonists, who found that it was a fragment of Ayrton's waistcoat, a piece of that felt, manufactured solely by the Granite House factory.

“You see, Pencroft,” observed Harding, “there has been resistance on the part of the unfortunate Ayrton. The convicts have dragged him away in spite of himself! Do you still doubt his honesty?”

“No, captain,” answered the sailor, “and I repented of my suspicion a long time ago! But it seems to me that something may be learned from the incident.”

“What is that?” asked the reporter.

“It is that Ayrton was not killed at the corral! That they dragged him away living, since he has resisted. Therefore, perhaps, he is still living!”

“Perhaps, indeed,” replied the engineer, who remained thoughtful.

This was a hope, to which Ayrton’s companions could still hold. Indeed, they had before believed that, surprised in the corral, Ayrton had fallen by a bullet, as Herbert had fallen. But if the convicts had not killed him at first, if they had brought him living to another part of the island, might it not be admitted that he was still their prisoner? Perhaps, even, one of them had found in Ayrton his old Australian companion Ben Joyce, the chief of the escaped convicts. And who knows but that they had conceived the impossible hope of bringing back Ayrton to themselves? He would have been very useful to them, if they had been able to make him turn traitor!

This incident was, therefore, favourably interpreted at the corral, and it no longer appeared impossible that they should find Ayrton again. On his side, if he was only a prisoner, Ayrton would no doubt do all he could to escape from the hands of the villains, and this would be a powerful aid to the settlers!

“At any rate,” observed Gideon Spilett, “if happily Ayrton did manage to escape, he would go directly to Granite House, for he could not know of the attempted assassination of which Herbert has been a victim, and consequently would never think of our being imprisoned in the corral.”

“Oh! I wish that he was there, at Granite House!” cried Pencroft, “and that we were there, too! For, although the rascals can do nothing to our house, they may plunder the plateau, our plantations, our poultry-yard!”

Pencroft had become a thorough farmer, heartily attached to his crops. But it must be said that Herbert was more anxious than any to return to Granite House, for he knew how much the presence of the settlers was needed there. And it was he who was keeping them at the corral! Therefore, one idea occupied his mind—to leave the corral, and when! He believed he could bear removal to Granite House. He was sure his strength would return more quickly in his room, with the air and sight of the sea!

Several times he pressed Gideon Spilett, but the latter, fearing, with good reason, that Herbert’s wounds, half healed, might reopen on the way, did not give the order to start.

However, something occurred which compelled Cyrus Harding and his two friends to yield to the lad’s wish, and God alone knew that this determination might cause them grief and remorse.

It was the 29th of November, seven o’clock in the evening. The three settlers were talking in Herbert’s room, when they heard Top utter quick barks.

Harding, Pencroft, and Spilett seized their guns and ran out of the house. Top, at the foot of the palisade, was jumping, barking, but it was with pleasure, not anger.

“Someone is coming.”

“Yes.”

“It is not an enemy!”

“Neb, perhaps?”

“Or Ayrton?”

These words had hardly been exchanged between the engineer and his two companions when a body leaped over the palisade and fell on the ground inside the corral.

It was Jup, Master Jup in person, to whom Top immediately gave a most cordial reception.

“Jup!” exclaimed Pencroft.

“Neb has sent him to us,” said the reporter.

“Then,” replied the engineer, “he must have some note on him.”

Pencroft rushed up to the orang. Certainly if Neb had any important matter to communicate to his master he could not employ a more sure or more rapid messenger, who could pass where neither the colonists could, nor even Top himself.

Cyrus Harding was not mistaken. At Jup’s neck hung a small bag, and in this bag was found a little note traced by Neb’s hand.

The despair of Harding and his companions may be imagined when they read these words: —

“Friday, six o’clock in the morning.

“Plateau invaded by convicts.

“Neb.”

They gazed at each other without uttering a word, then they re-entered the house. What were they to do? The convicts on Prospect Heights! that was disaster, devastation, ruin.

Herbert, on seeing the engineer, the reporter, and Pencroft re-enter, guessed that their situation was aggravated, and when he saw Jup, he no longer doubted that some misfortune menaced Granite House.

“Captain Harding,” said he, “I must go; I can bear the journey. I must go.”

Gideon Spilett approached Herbert; then, having looked at him, —

“Let us go, then!” said he.

The question was quickly decided whether Herbert should be carried on a litter or in the cart which had brought Ayrton to the corral. The motion of the litter would have been more easy for the wounded lad, but it would have necessitated two bearers, that is to say, there would have been two guns less for defence if an attack was made on the road. Would they not, on

the contrary, by employing the cart leave every arm free? Was it impossible to place the mattress on which Herbert was lying in it, and to advance with so much care that any jolt should be avoided? It could be done.

The cart was brought. Pencroft harnessed the onager. Cyrus Harding and the reporter raised Herbert's mattress and placed it on the bottom of the cart. The weather was fine. The sun's bright rays glanced through the trees.

"Are the guns ready?" asked Cyrus Harding.

They were. The engineer and Pencroft, each armed with a double-barrelled gun, and Gideon Spilett carrying his rifle, had nothing to do but start.

"Are you comfortable, Herbert?" asked the engineer.

"Ah, captain," replied the lad, "don't be uneasy, I shall not die on the road!"

While speaking thus, it could be seen that the poor boy had called up all his energy, and by the energy of a powerful will had collected his failing strength.

The engineer felt his heart sink painfully. He still hesitated to give the signal for departure; but that would have driven Herbert to despair—killed him perhaps.

"Forward!" said Harding.

The gate of the corral was opened. Jup and Top, who knew when to be silent, ran in advance. The cart came out, the gate was reclosed, and the onager, led by Pencroft, advanced at a slow pace.

Certainly, it would have been safer to have taken a different road than that which led straight from the corral to Granite House, but the cart would have met with great difficulties in moving under the trees. It was necessary, therefore, to follow this way, although it was well known to the convicts.

Cyrus Harding and Gideon Spilett walked one on each side of the cart, ready to answer to any attack. However, it was not probable that the convicts would have yet left the plateau of Prospect Heights.

Neb's note had evidently been written and sent as soon as the convicts had shown themselves there. Now, this note was dated six o'clock in the morning, and the active orang, accustomed to come frequently to the corral, had taken scarcely three quarters of an hour to cross the five miles which separated it from Granite House. They would, therefore, be safe at that time, and if there was any occasion for firing, it would probably not be until they were in the neighbourhood of Granite House. However, the colonists kept a strict watch. Top and Jup, the latter armed with his club, sometimes in front, sometimes beating the wood at the sides of the road, signaled no danger.

The cart advanced slowly under Pencroft's guidance. It had left the corral at half-past seven. An hour after, four out of the five miles had been cleared, without any incident having occurred. The road was as deserted as all that part of the Jacamar Wood which lay between

the Mercy and the lake. There was no occasion for any warning. The wood appeared as deserted as on the day when the colonists first landed on the island.

They approached the plateau. Another mile and they would see the bridge over Creek Glycerine. Cyrus Harding expected to find it in its place; supposing that the convicts would have crossed it, and that, after having passed one of the streams which enclosed the plateau, they would have taken the precaution to lower it again, so as to keep open a retreat.

At length an opening in the trees allowed the sea-horizon to be seen. But the cart continued its progress, for not one of its defenders thought of abandoning it.

At that moment Pencroft stopped the onager, and in a hoarse voice, —

“Oh! the villains!” he exclaimed.

And he pointed to a thick smoke rising from the mill, the sheds, and the buildings at the poultry-yard.

A man was moving about in the midst of the smoke. It was Neb.

His companions uttered a shout. He heard, and ran to meet them.

The convicts had left the plateau nearly half-an-hour before, having devastated it!

“And Mr. Herbert?” asked Neb.

Gideon Spilett returned to the cart.

Herbert had lost consciousness!

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## THE WANDERER'S NECKLACE by H Rider Haggard

### Book III: Egypt

#### Chapter III: The Valley of the Dead Kings

Martina and I had made a plan. Palka, after much coaxing, took us with her one evening when she went to place the accustomed offerings in the Valley of the Dead. Indeed, at first she refused outright to allow us to accompany her, because, she said, only those who were born in the village of Kurna had made such offerings since the days when the Pharaohs ruled, and that if strangers shared in this duty it might bring misfortune. We answered, however, that if so the misfortune would fall on us, the intruders. Also we pointed out that the jars of water and milk were heavy, and, as it happened, there was no one from the hamlet to help to carry them this night. Having weighed these facts, Palka changed her mind.

“Well,” she said, “it is true that I grow fat, and after labouring all day at this and that have no desire to bear burdens like an ass. So come if you will, and if you die or evil spirits carry you away, do not add yourselves to the number of the ghosts, of whom there are too many hereabouts, and blame me afterwards.”

“On the contrary,” I said, “we will make you our heirs,” and I laid a bag containing some pieces of money upon the table.

Palka, who was a saving woman, took the money, for I heard it rattle in her hand, hung the jars about my shoulders, and gave Martina the meat and corn in a basket. The flat cakes, however, she carried herself on a wooden trencher, because, as she said, she feared lest we should break them and anger the ghosts, who liked their food to be well served. So we started, and presently entered the mouth of that awful valley which, Martina told me, looked as though it had been riven through the mountain by lightning strokes and then blasted with a curse.

Up this dry and desolate place, which, she said, was bordered on either side by walls of grey and jagged rock, we walked in silence. Only I noted that the dog which had followed us from the house clung close to our heels and now and again whimpered uneasily.

“The beast sees what we cannot see,” whispered Palka in explanation.

At last we halted, and I set down the jars at her bidding upon a flat rock which she called the Table of Offerings.

“See!” she exclaimed to Martina, “those that were placed here three days ago are all emptied and neatly piled together by the ghosts. I told Hodur that they did this, but he would not believe me. Now let us pack them up in the baskets and begone, for the sun sets and the moon rises within the half of an hour. I would not be here in the dark for ten pieces of pure gold.”

“Then go swiftly, Palka,” I said, “for we bide here this night.”

“Are you mad?” she asked.

“Not at all,” I answered. “A wise man once told me that if one who is blind can but come face to face with a spirit, he sees it and thereby regains his sight. If you would know the truth, that is why I have wandered so far from my own country to find some land where ghosts may be met.”

“Now I am sure that you are mad,” exclaimed Palka. “Come, Hilda, and leave this fool to make trial of his cure for blindness.”

“Nay,” answered Martina, “I must stay with my uncle, although I am very much afraid. If I did not, he would beat me afterwards.”

“Beat you! Hodur beat a woman! Oh! you are both mad. Or perhaps you are ghosts also. I have thought it once or twice, who at least am sure that you are other than you seem. Holy Jesus! this place grows dark, and I tell you it is full of dead kings. May the Saints guard you; at the least, you’ll keep high company at your death. Farewell; whate’er befalls, blame me not who warned you,” and she departed at a run, the empty vessels rattling on her back and the dog yapping behind her.

When she had gone the silence grew deep.

“Now, Martina,” I whispered, “find some place where we may hide whence you can see this Table of Offerings.”

She led me to where a fallen rock lay within a few paces, and behind it we sat ourselves down in such a position that Martina could watch the Table of Offerings by the light of the moon.

Here we waited for a long while; it may have been two hours, or three, or four. At least I knew that, although I could see nothing, the solemnity of that place sank into my soul. I felt as though the dead were moving about me in the silence. I think it was the same with Martina, for although the night was very hot in that stifling, airless valley, she shivered at my side. At last I felt her start and heard her whisper:

“I see a figure. It creeps from the shadow of the cliff towards the Table of Offerings.”

“What is it like?” I asked.

“It is a woman’s figure draped in white cloths; she looks about her; she takes up the offerings and places them in a basket she carries. It is a woman—no ghost—for she drinks from one of the jars. Oh! now the moonlight shines upon her face; it is that of Heliodore!”

I heard and could restrain myself no longer. Leaping up, I ran towards where I knew the Table of Offerings to be. I tried to speak, but my voice choked in my throat. The woman saw or heard me coming through the shadows. At least, uttering a low cry, she fled away, for I caught the sound of her feet on the rocks and sand. Then I tripped over a stone and fell down.

In a moment Martina was at my side.

“Truly you are foolish, Olaf,” she said. “Did you think that the lady Heliodore would know you at night, changed as you are and in this garb, that you must rush at her like an angry bull?”

Now she has gone, and perchance we shall never find her more. Why did you not speak to her?"

"Because my voice choked within me. Oh! blame me not, Martina. If you knew what it is to love as I do and after so many fears and sorrows——"

"I trust that I should know also how to control my love," broke in Martina sharply. "Come, waste no more time in talk. Let us search."

Then she took me by the hand and led me to where she had last seen Heliodore.

"She has vanished away," she said, "here is nothing but rock."

"It cannot be," I answered. "Oh! that I had my eyes again, if for an hour, I who was the best tracker in Jutland. See if no stone has been stirred, Martina. The sand will be damper where it has lain."

She left me, and presently returned.

"I have found something," she said. "When Heliodore fled she still held her basket, which from the look of it was last used by the Pharaohs. At least, one of the cakes has fallen from or through it. Come."

She led me to the cliff, and up it to perhaps twice the height of a man, then round a projecting rock.

"Here is a hole," she said, "such as jackals might make. Perchance it leads into one of the old tombs whereof the mouth is sealed. It was on the edge of the hole that I found the cake, therefore doubtless Heliodore went down it. Now, what shall we do?"

"Follow, I think. Where is it?"

"Nay, I go first. Give me your hand, Olaf, and lie upon your breast."

I did so, and presently felt the weight of Martina swinging on my arm.

"Leave go," she said faintly, like one who is afraid.

I obeyed, though with doubt, and heard her feet strike upon some floor.

"Thanks be the saints, all is well," she said. "For aught I knew this hole might have been as deep as that in the Chamber of the Pit. Let yourself down it, feet first, and drop. 'Tis but shallow."

I did so, and found myself beside Martina.

"Now, in the darkness you are the better guide," she whispered. "Lead on, I'll follow, holding to your robe."

So I crept forward warily and safely, as the blind can do, till presently she exclaimed,

“Halt, here is light again. I think that the roof of the tomb, for by the paintings on the walls such it must be, has fallen in. It seems to be a kind of central chamber, out of which run great galleries that slope downwards and are full of bats. Ah! one of them is caught in my hair. Olaf, I will go no farther. I fear bats more than ghosts, or anything in the world.”

Now, I considered a while till a thought struck me. On my back was my beggar’s harp. I unslung it and swept its chords, and wild and sad they sounded in that solemn place. Then I began to sing an old song that twice or thrice I had sung with Heliodore in Byzantium. This song told of a lover seeking his mistress. It was for two voices, since in the song the mistress answered verse for verse. Here are those of the lines that I remember, or, rather, the spirit of them rendered into English. I sang the first verse and waited.

“Dear maid of mine,  
I bid my strings  
Beat on thy shrine  
With music’s wings.  
Palace or cell  
A shrine I see,  
If there thou dwell  
And answer me.”

There was no answer, so I sang the second verse and once more waited.

“On thy love’s fire  
My passion breathes,  
Wind of Desire  
Thy incense wreathes.  
Greeting! To thee,  
Or soon or late,  
I, bond or free,  
Am dedicate.”

And from somewhere far away in the recesses of that great cave came the answering strophe.

“O Love sublime  
And undismayed,  
No touch of Time  
Upon thee laid.  
That that is thine;  
Ended the quest!  
I seek my shrine  
Upon thy breast.”

Then I laid down the harp.

At last a voice, the voice of Heliodore speaking whence I knew not, asked,

“Do the dead sing, or is it a living man? And if so, how is that man named?”

“A living man,” I replied, “and he is named Olaf, son of Thorvald, or otherwise Michael. That name was given him in the cathedral at Byzantium, where first his eyes fell on a certain Heliodore, daughter of Magas the Egyptian, whom now he seeks.”

I heard the sound of footsteps creeping towards me and Heliodore’s voice say,

“Let me see your face, you who name yourself Olaf, for know that in these haunted tombs ghosts and visions and mocking voices play strange tricks. Why do you hide your face, you who call yourself Olaf?”

“Because the eyes are gone from it, Heliodore. Irene robbed it of the eyes from jealousy of you, swearing that never more should they behold your beauty. Perchance you would not wish to come too near to an eyeless man wrapped in a beggar’s robe.”

She looked—I felt her look. She sobbed—I heard her sob, and then her arms were about me and her lips were pressed upon my own.

So at length came joy such as I cannot tell; the joy of lost love found again.

A while went by, how long I know not, and at last I said,

“Where is Martina? It is time we left this place.”

“Martina!” she exclaimed. “Do you mean Irene’s lady, and is she here? If so, how comes she to be travelling with you, Olaf?”

“As the best friend man ever had, Heliodore; as one who clung to him in his ruin and saved him from a cruel death; as one who has risked her life to help him in his desperate search, and without whom that search had failed.”

“Then may God reward her, Olaf, for I did not know there were such women in the world. Lady Martina! Where are you, lady Martina?”

Thrice she cried the words, and at the third time an answer came from the shadows at a distance.

“I am here,” said Martina’s voice with a little yawn. “I was weary and have slept while you two greeted each other. Well met at last, lady Heliodore. See, I have brought you back your Olaf, blind it is true, but otherwise lacking nothing of health and strength and station.”

Then Heliodore ran to her and kissed first her hand and next her lips. In after days she told me that for those of one who had been sleeping the eyes of Martina seemed to be strangely wet and red. But if this were so her voice trembled not at all.

“Truly you two should give thanks to God,” she said, “Who has brought you together again in so wondrous a fashion, as I do on your behalf from the bottom of my heart. Yet you are still hemmed round by dangers many and great. What now, Olaf? Will you become a ghost also

and dwell here in the tomb with Heliodore; and if so, what tale shall I tell to Palka and the rest?"

"Not so," I answered. "I think it will be best that we should return to Kurna. Heliodore must play her part as the spirit of a queen till we can hire some boat and escape with her down the Nile."

"Never," she cried, "I cannot, I cannot. Having come together we must separate no more. Oh! Olaf, you do not know what a life has been mine during all these dreadful months. When I escaped from Musa by stabbing the eunuch who was in charge of me, for which hideous deed may I be forgiven," and I felt her shudder at my side, "I fled I knew not whither till I found myself in this valley, where I hid till the night was gone. Then at daybreak I peeped out from the mouth of the valley and saw the Moslems searching for me, but as yet a long way off. Also now I knew this valley. It was that to which my father had brought me as a child when he came to search for the burying-place of his ancestor, the Pharaoh, which records he had read told him was here. I remembered everything: where the tomb should be, how we had entered it through a hole, how we had found the mummy of a royal lady, whose face was covered with a gilded mask, and on her breast the necklace which I wear."

"I ran along the valley, searching the left side of it with my eyes, till I saw a flat stone which I knew again. It was called the Table of Offerings. I was sure that the hole by which we had entered the tomb was quite near to this stone and a little above it, in the face of the cliff. I climbed; I found what seemed to be the hole, though of this I could not be certain. I crept down it till it came to an end, and then, in my terror, hung by my hands and dropped into the darkness, not knowing whither I fell, or caring over much if I were killed. As it chanced it was but a little way, and, finding myself unhurt, I crawled along the cavern till I reached this place where there is light, for here the roof of the cave has fallen in. While I crouched amid the rocks I heard the voices of the soldiers above me, heard their officer also bidding them bring ropes and torches. To the left of where you stand there is a sloping passage that runs down to the great central chamber where sleeps some mighty king, and out of this passage open other chambers. Into the first of these the light of the morning sun struggles feebly. I entered it, seeking somewhere to hide myself, and saw a painted coffin lying on the floor near to the marble sarcophagus from which it had been dragged. It was that in which we had found the body of my ancestress; but since then thieves had been in this place. We had left the coffin in the sarcophagus and the mummy in the coffin, and replaced their lids. Now the mummy lay on the floor, half unwrapped and broken in two beneath the breast. Moreover, the face, which I remembered as being so like my own, was gone to dust, so that there remained of it nothing but a skull, to which hung tresses of long black hair, as, indeed, you may see for yourself."

"By the side of the body was the gilded mask, with black and staring eyes, and the painted breast-piece of stiff linen, neither of which the thieves had found worth stealing."

"I looked and a thought came to me. Lifting the mummy, I thrust it into the sarcophagus, all of it save the gilded mask and the painted breast-piece of stiff linen. Then I laid myself down in the coffin, of which the lid, still lying crosswise, hid me to the waist, and drew the gilded mask and painted breast-piece over my head and bosom. Scarcely was it done when the soldiers entered. By now the reflected sunlight had faded from the place, leaving it in deep shadow; but some of the men held burning torches made from splinters of old coffins, that were full of pitch."

“‘Feet have passed here; I saw the marks of them in the dust,’ said the officer. ‘She may have hidden in this place. Search! Search! It will go hard with us if we return to Musa to tell him that he has lost his toy.’

“They looked into the sarcophagus and saw the broken mummy. Indeed, one of them lifted it, unwillingly enough, and let it fall again, saying grimly,

“‘Musa would scarce care for this companion, though in her day she may have been fair enough.’

“Then they came to the coffin.

“‘Here’s another,’ exclaimed the soldier, ‘and one with a gold face. Allah! how its eyes stare.’

“‘Pull it out,’ said the officer.

“‘Let that be your task,’ answered the man. ‘I’ll defile myself with no more corpses.’

“The officer came and looked. ‘What a haunted hole is this, full of the ghosts of idol worshippers, or so I think,’ he said. ‘Those eyes stare curses at us. Well, the Christian maid is not here. On, before the torches fail.’

“Then they went, leaving me; the painted linen creaked upon my breast as I breathed again.

“‘Till nightfall I lay in that coffin, fearing lest they should return; and I tell you, Olaf, that strange dreams came to me there, for I think I swooned or slept in that narrow bed. Yes, dreams of the past, which you shall hear one day, if we live, for they seem to have to do with you and me. Aye, I thought that the dead woman in the sarcophagus at my side awoke and told them to me. At length I rose and crept back to this place where we stand, for here I could see the friendly light, and being outworn, laid me down and slept.

“At the first break of day I crawled from the tomb, followed that same road by which I had entered, though I found it hard to climb up through the entrance hole.

“No living thing was to be seen in the valley, except a great night bird flitting to its haunt. I was parched with thirst, and knowing that in this dry place I soon must perish, I glided from rock to rock towards the mouth of the valley, thinking to find some other grave or cranny where I might lie hid till night came again and I could descend to the plain and drink. But, Olaf, before I had gone many steps I discovered fresh food, milk and water laid upon a rock, and though I feared lest they might be poisoned, ate and drank of them. When I knew that they were wholesome I thought that some friend must have set them there to satisfy my wants, though I knew not who the friend could be. Afterwards I learned that this food was an offering to the ghosts of the dead. Among our forefathers in forgotten generations it was, I know, the custom to make such offerings, since in their blindness they believed that the spirits of their beloved needed sustenance as their bodies once had done. Doubtless the memory of the rite still survives; at least, to this day the offerings are made. Indeed, when it was found that they were not made in vain, more and more of them were brought, so that I have lacked nothing.

“Here then I have dwelt for many moons among the dust of men departed, only now and again wandering out at night. Once or twice folk have seen me when I ventured to the plains, and I have been tempted to speak to them and ask their help. But always they fled away, believing me to be the ghost of some bygone queen. Indeed, to speak truth, Olaf, this companionship with spirits, for spirits do dwell in these tombs—I have seen them, I tell you I have seen them—has so worked upon my soul that at times I feel as though I were already of their company. Moreover, I knew that I could not live long. The loneliness was sucking up my life as the dry sand sucks water. Had you not come, Olaf, within some few days or weeks I should have died.”

Now I spoke for the first time, saying,

“And did you wish to die, Heliodore?”

“No. Before the war between Musa and my father, Magas, news came to us from Byzantium that Irene had killed you. All believed it save I, who did not believe.”

“Why not, Heliodore?”

“Because I could not feel that you were dead. Therefore I fought for my life, who otherwise, after we were conquered and ruined and my father was slain fighting nobly, should have stabbed, not that eunuch, but myself. Then later, in this tomb, I came to know that you were not dead. The other lost ones I could feel about me from time to time, but you never, you who would have been the first to seek me when my soul was open to such whisperings. So I lived on when all else would have died, because hope burned in me like a lamp unquenchable. And at last you came! Oh! at last you came!”

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SUBMISSIONS CALL SUBMISSIONS CALL SUBMISSIONS CALL  
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**Lovecraftiana—the Magazine of Eldritch Horror**

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