

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

Schlock! **WEBZINE**

VOL. 14, ISSUE 8
27TH JANUARY 2019

**DEATH
MASKS**
BY CORY
BROCK
*LET THE
DEAD
REST...*

**A VAMPIRE'S
THOUGHTS OF
KISSING
FRANCIS-MARIE
DE CHATILLON**

**CALL ME
NAOMI**
BY CHRIS
MIDDLEHURST
*"HOW COME
YOU DON'T
EVER BRING
ANYONE HOME,
NAOMI?"*

**THE FRUIT
OF DEATH**
ROB BLISS

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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!

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

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This Edition

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EDITORIAL

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL! *Horror Comics and Comic Horror* from Vincent Davis: CARTOON

DEATH MASKS by Cory Brock— *You should let the dead rest...* SWORD AND SORCERY
CALL ME NAOMI by Chris Middlehurst— *“So how come you don't ever bring anyone home, Naomi?”* HORROR

JUDGEMENT DAY by Steven Havelock— *Death is near...* HORROR

A VAMPIRE'S THOUGHTS ON KISSING by Francis-Marie de Chatillon— *She's totally yours...* HORROR

THE FRUIT OF DEATH by Rob Bliss— *Mixed blessings...* HORROR

THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE Part Forty-Six by Gregory KH Bryant— *Kill the bitch...* SPACE OPERA

ERIC BRIGHTYES Chapter Six by H Rider Haggard— *How Asmund the Priest Was Betrothed To Unna...* SWORD AND SORCERY

THE MOON POOL Chapter Twenty-Five by A. Merritt— *The Wooing of Lakla...* SCIENCE FICTION CLASSIC

EDITORIAL

This week, a grave robbing expedition goes wrong, bestial romance brings a family closer, Kyle and Günter learn something about the nature of their existence, a vampire tells us how to use those lips, and Death bears fruit.

The mob calls for the death of Lacey. Unna accepts as her betrothed another man than Eric. And in the Moon Pool, Larry woos Lakla.

—Gavin Chappell

Coming soon from Rogue Planet Press: *Schlock Quarterly* Volume 3, Issue 7.



[Return to Contents](#)

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"THE JAW JUST DOESN'T DISLUDGE LIKE IT USED TO."

Vincent is an artist who has consistently been on assignment in the art world for over twenty years. Throughout his career he has acquired a toolbox of diverse skills (from freehand drawing to digital design, t-shirt designer to muralist). His styles range from the wildly abstract to pulp style comics.

In 2013, his work in END TIMES won an award in the Best Horror Anthology category for that

year. When Vincent is not at his drawing board he can be found in the classroom teaching cartooning and illustration to his students at Westchester Community College in Valhalla NY.

He lives in Mamaroneck NY with his wife Jennie and dog Skip.

<https://www.freelanced.com/vincentdavis>

[Return to Contents](#)

DEATH MASKS by Cory Brock

Ivar Closse rode into the town of Holstead as the sun was setting, toward several houses clustered around a two storey inn. Smoke billowed from the inn's chimney, and from the small town rolling hills of wheat gently swayed in the cool breeze.

On arrival, Ivar reined up his horse in front of the inn and dismounted. He nodded to an older boy who scampered out of the nearby stables to take the reins. Ivar spoke to the child.

"Excuse me, boy," Ivar said.

"Aye, sir?" he replied.

"By any chance, have you seen a man with brands on his cheeks come through?" Ivar asked, expecting to be disappointed by the usual answer.

"Aye," the boy replied, "he rode in two days ago. He should be in right now. My pa served up dinner not long ago."

"Good lad," Ivar said with relief. He made his way up the steps to the inn.

Upon entry he noticed that the inn was mostly empty. An older man sat behind a short bar that ran along the wall opposite Ivar. Nearby, two other men were seated at a table in the centre of the room talking over mugs of ale. Another man was seated at a table by the fireplace. He was slowly spooning out bites from a bowl of stew.

"Good day, sir," said the man behind the bar. "May I help you?"

Ivar gazed toward the older man. "A pint of ale," he answered.

The bartender nodded and turned to get the drink. "I'll have it out shortly. Take a seat where you please and I'll bring it out to you."

Ivar acknowledged the words and made his way toward the lone man sitting near the fireplace. The man sat with his back turned to him, yet Ivar knew this was the man he was after.

"Mathias Gale," Ivar called out as he approached the gentleman.

The man perked up and glanced over his shoulder. He watched Ivar move across from him and take a seat. As he seated himself, the bartender arrived and placed a mug in front of him.

"Would you like any food to follow that with?" the working man asked.

"No, thank you, this will do fine," Ivar replied. He fished out three copper coins from a pouch at his side and payed the man for his services.

“Thank you, sir,” the man beamed with satisfaction. He returned to the bar, leaving the two alone to drink.

Ivar felt Mathias’ eyes boring into him. He took a long drink from the mug before reflecting that gaze with his own. He sat the mug down and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand without breaking eye contact.

Mathias was an older man; his skin tanned and wrinkled due to years spent outside. His dark hair was streaked with grey, and small inverted V-shaped brands stood out from a layer of stubble that covered his cheeks. Each brand pointed up to his vibrant green eyes, which still mirrored the stare from Ivar in a cold and stoic distance.

“I’ve been on your trail for several days now,” Ivar said. “I never thought I’d see a man from the Order passing through this land.”

“The Order has been disbanded for many years,” Mathias said. He turned his gaze back down to his bowl of stew and spooned out another bite.

Ivar forced a wry smile as he searched for what to say. Mathias soon turned his gaze back toward him.

“Did you come all this way just to admire me?” Mathias asked. He met Ivar’s smile with a smirk of his own.

“Er, no, I had heard that you are open to hire. You are Mathias Gale, are you not?”

“Who else could I be?” Mathias said sombrely. He looked Ivar up and down as though he were seeing him for the first time. “What business do you have with an ex-member of the Order of the One?” The tone in his voice was sardonic, yet laced with genuine curiosity.

“Glad you asked,” Ivar said. Having regained some confidence, Ivar reached into a leather bag that was slung about his shoulder and pulled out a large octagonal stone and a tattered piece of paper. He placed both on the table.

“I am a collector of artefacts,” Ivar said. He slid the worn note towards Mathias. “Take a look at that. You’ll find it’ll explain why I brought these to your attention.”

Mathias turned the parchment and unfolded it. On it was a crudely drawn map.

“I’ve recently come into possession of that map from an old friend, as well as this,” Ivar continued, referring to the stone.

Mathias shrugged indifferently and slid the map back to Ivar. “What does that concern me?” A growing disinterest began to show in the tone of his voice.

Ivar knitted his brow. “That map shows the location of a locked tomb that I believe this stone is the key to opening.”

Mathias scoffed lightly and turned his head to look at the others in the inn, “You should let the dead rest. Besides, what’s stopping you from going yourself?”

“I would prefer a guide,” Ivar replied sheepishly. “This map points to the crag lands a day’s ride south, and I’m well aware that some thieves call that land home.”

Mathias flashed a small grin. “The wolves would get you before any outlaws did.”

“All the more reason for a guide,” Ivar responded. “If it’s money that concerns you, I am ready to pay.”

Ivar pulled out three gold coins from his coin purse and slid them towards Mathias.

“You’ll get three more once we return,” Ivar continued.

Mathias cast a sidelong look down at the gold and then back to Ivar. His expression was unchanged, but he had started to lend an ear to Ivar’s request at sight of the gold.

“So,” Mathias started. “I help you find some old tomb for six gold pieces?”

“Aye,” Ivar said eagerly.

“Yet whatever is inside is all for you, I suppose? Must be some grand treasure if you’ve been so eager to come after me.”

Ivar smiled. “I am after one specific item. I will happily part with any other treasures we happen to find.”

Mathias’ eyes narrowed as he studied Ivar. His eyes flicked down to the gold on the table and then back to Ivar’s smiling visage. After a moment he raked the coins from the table to his hand and stood.

“Do we have a deal?” Ivar asked, his smile faltering.

“We leave at daybreak,” Mathias said. He made his way up to his room.

The two departed from the inn at dawn, and rode along the winding road for miles in silence. Ivar eyed Mathias warily at times, but Mathias never turned his gaze from the road ahead. He travelled as though in a trance; his shield thumped a steady rhythm against his back as his mace swayed slowly by his side.

Soon the land around them turned rocky and Mathias broke from the road towards the remnants of a narrow path. They continued down this trail, over rough stone and through deep trenches, until the rocky surface grew too rough for their horses.

Mathias swung down from the saddle and adjusted his shield in its sling along his shoulder. Ivar followed suit, and the two began to search for the entrance to the tomb on foot.

An hour passed as they searched for their destination, but soon they found the narrow cave that marked the entrance to the tomb as the sun began its descent towards the horizon. Mathias lit a torch and the two entered.

The cave meandered into the hillside for a quarter mile before it ended in a smooth stone door. Mathias thrust his torch toward the door; cobwebs fell away in smouldering ash.

“There’s your tomb,” he said.

Ivar stepped ahead of Mathias and ran his hands along the stone door. There were remnants of runes carved on it, but time had worn them illegible. In the middle was a deep octagonal indentation. Ivar pulled the stone from his pouch and slid it into the receptacle. A shifting sound echoed through the cave.

Mathias glanced around, but Ivar focused on the door. He pushed against it, and after a moment it slid back.

“Bring the torch,” Ivar urged.

Mathias held the torch high as he followed through the doorway.

The cave opened into a spacious room. Shadows from the torchlight danced along the walls and ceiling. A single shaft of light from the waning sun outside shone down in the middle of the room. The beam illuminated a large bed. Upon it lie the body of a man and a woman.

Mathias furrowed his brow as he looked around. The tomb was decorated with lavish tapestries and thick rugs, all perfectly preserved. There were heavy wooden chests along the walls, shelves piled high with thick books and scrolls, as well as ornately carved tables and chairs placed about.

“Something is strange here,” he said.

Ivar made his way towards the bed. He clenched his fists eagerly as he approached and wet his lips in anticipation. He made his way to the side of the bed where the body of the woman lie.

She was dressed in a light blue silk gown, and her pale hands were folded across her as though asleep. The man to her side wore oiled leather armour and heavy purple robes. His hands clutched a longsword that rested atop him. Both wore porcelain masks carved with runes.

“Two masks,” Ivar proclaimed. “I only expected one!”

“Masks?” Mathias muttered.

The mention of masks awoke a memory in Mathias; a story he had heard during his time in the Order. Hundreds of years ago, it was told, sorcerer lords near the end of their lives would craft masks that they would don in death. Soaked in blood and imbued with the life essence it carried, the masks would stave off death and leave their wearer in a torpid state; only to be awoken to protect their burial chambers and the secrets interred with them.

He turned towards Ivar. He saw Ivar reaching for the woman’s mask and felt a chill run through him.

“No, fool!” he yelled.

Ivar turned towards him with a puzzled look.

The woman’s hands thrust out and grabbed Ivar by the head.

Ivar let loose a scream that reverberated off the chamber walls. The woman sat up, still clutching Ivar as he thrashed about. Mathias saw the body of the man beside her begin to stir as well.

“Damn you,” Mathias yelled.

He threw down his torch and unslung his shield from his shoulder. Pulling his mace from its steel loop at his side he started towards the woman, but the masked man had already stood, sword in hand, and moved between Mathias and Ivar. Mathias could see Ivar’s movements becoming feebler. His screams grew weaker.

The masked man moved with an unexpected swiftness and brought the longsword down at Mathias. Once, twice, three times the steel met his shield; each blow sent a jolt of pain through his arm. Mathias spun to the side as the creature came down with a fourth strike. Mathias brought his mace around in an arc towards the masked man’s body. The mace connected with a loud crunch of bone, and the creature was sent sprawling across the floor. However, as soon as it had fallen, it made to stand again.

“Bloody devil,” Mathias spat. He readied his shield again.

He caught a movement from the corner of his eye, but before he could turn he felt icy hands grip his head from behind. Mathias let out a growl that soon turned to a scream as the woman’s grip tightened. The sensation of a thousand needles stabbed into him beneath her grip, and his

strength began to falter. He threw back his head in desperation and pain, and heard a crack as he connected with the woman's mask.

Her grip loosened and Mathias fell away from her. He staggered and looked up to her. She clawed at her face as light shone from the crack in her mask. An inhuman shriek echoed from her as she flailed in pain.

The other creature approached again; this time in rage. It rained down savage blows with its sword. Mathias deflected some with his shield and spun away from others, yet he began to tire from the assault. His head ached from the creature's grip and his body felt sluggish.

They continued their macabre dance; the discarded torch cast distorted shadows along the walls as they fought. Mathias' shoulders ached and his shield arm grew heavy, yet his masked assailant did not relent.

The creature thrust its sword at Mathias. He made to knock it aside with his shield, but he was a moment too slow. The sword sliced across his upper arm, biting through thick leather and into his flesh beneath. Mathias leapt back and clutched at his wound. Blood seeped between his fingers and dripped to the floor.

He had only a moment's respite before the creature rushed him once more, looking to end its intruder's life. It lunged at Mathias, but this time Mathias saw an opening. He deflected the sword thrust, bringing the creature off balance. He whirled the mace around in a wide arc, and brought it crashing into the creature's face. Its mask shattered to pieces as the mace connected. The creature's face broke beneath the blow.

Mathias stumbled back as the creature fell. Its sword tumbled away as both hands went to its face. It let out a howl, and its body withered before Mathias' eyes. Hundreds of years of age rushed on in seconds, and soon the creature lay dead; a dried husk of a man.

The masked woman let out another cry and threw herself beside the body of her companion. She knelt over its body. Her body convulsed with violent sobs. She cast a look towards Mathias. Her eyes burned with hatred beneath her mask. Mathias readied himself for another attack, but she cast her sight back to the corpse before her. She brought her hands to her face and ripped off her mask.

Painful wails echoed as her body withered. In a moments time her body lie motionless next to the other.

Mathias circled around their bodies, shield still raised, then broke off to where Ivar lie beside the bed. He turned Ivar over and let out a curse.

Ivar was dead, much like the other corpses behind him. His body appeared aged; dried and withered as though it were hundreds of years old. Scars from where the creature had grabbed him stood out on his withered skin.

Mathias stood and clutched at his wounded arm. The pain became prevalent as the adrenaline of battle faded. He sighed in relief as he examined the cut. Though the wound was painful, the cut itself was shallow.

Mathias looked back towards the creatures on the floor. He walked over as he shouldered his shield and slipped his mace back in its loop.

He lifted the woman's body and placed it back on the bed where she originally lay. He also returned the man's body to lie next to her. He then wet his thumb with blood that ran down his arm.

"May your souls find rest with the One," he said. He drew chevrons with his blood, similar to those branded upon his cheeks, on each of their heads.

Turning from the bed he again took notice of the room. Where once there had been lavish tapestries and rich coloured rugs, chests of gold and shelves of books, there were scraps of tattered cloth and broken strong boxes. The illusion of life had died with the creatures.

Mathias turned his gaze upon the corpse of Ivar.

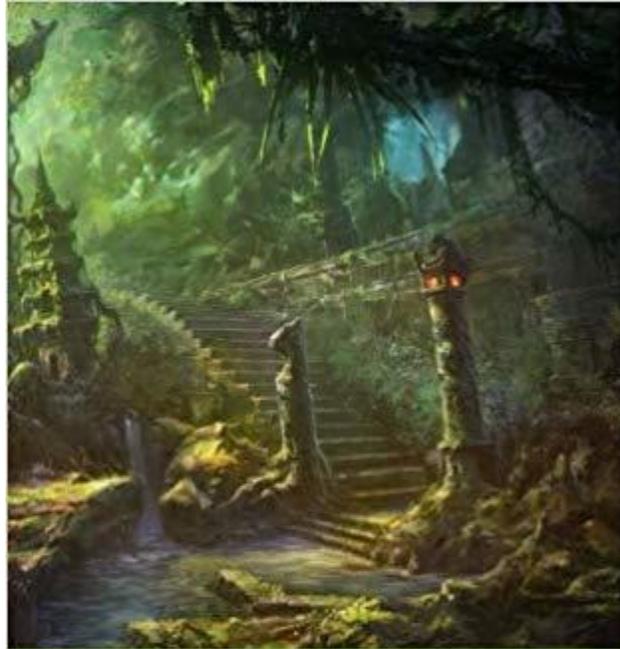
"You were a fool to come here," he said. "Yet you deserve a burial all the same."

He stooped over the body and ripped the coin purse from the corpse.

"But not before my payment."

Mathias lifted Ivar's body over his shoulder. He stopped beside the cracked mask that the woman had torn from her face as he left the chamber. It lie on the floor facing up at him. Mathias lifted his foot and brought it crashing down. Pieces of porcelain scattered along the floor.

THE END



Sherlock Holmes

and the Beast-men of Atlantis

**Milly 'Mad Dog'
McGuigan**

[Return to Contents](#)

CALL ME NAOMI by Chris Middlehurst

Call me Naomi. No one else will. I was born and raised in a little two-storey semi in Twickenham just over the road by the rugby stadium near a pub called "The Turk's Head." My father bought the house many years before, long before he met my mother. He furnished it with his own memories since the late nineteen seventies. He knew that house like the back of his hand. He had pretty hands, my father. Most dainty considering what he did with them. I never knew my mother, of course. I killed her. She died in childbirth, the poor thing. These things happen. Caesareans can go that way. My mother and father both knew that. Didn't stop my father from hating me.

I never really knew what he did for a living. I think he was in the films. Not in the films: nothing that glamorous. He was a production designer or second unit assistant director or something. He had the keys to all the props, I knew that much. His study was covered in film posters and movie memorabilia: a face cast of an actor here, the furry digits of a horror monster's hand there. A horrible Hammer horror hammer he used as a paperweight for papers that were never there. Old film posters from the 1930s Universal classics. Names like James Whale. Bela Lugosi. Fay Wray.

One day my father came home with a present from me: a toy gorilla I called Dino. He'd got him from the stop-motion animatronics department: I never knew the name of the film it was from. Dino was about half my size, made from black horse hair and with detachable hands, limbs and claws so that he could be taken apart. Dino's best features were his eyes: huge, black irises surrounded by milky, clotted creamy whites. They looked like blackened burnt fried eggs. They were beautiful to me.

I used to hold Dino's face in my arms and push my legs up against his chest so that he seemed to be flying across the pink teddy bear wallpaper of my bedroom. I dreamed he would lie on top of me and crush me into the mattress with his hairy frame. I imagined his fat and moistened lips pressed against mine, his buttoned nose pushed upwards against my face in aristocratic simian disdain. I imagined the smell of his hairy compact chest: of tropical bugs and rotting bananas crushed by his detachable paws. Tree trunks covered by millions of ants. I saw my straining grimacing face reflected in his fried egg eyes as I masturbated myself to sleep.

Then I discovered Dino had a retractable penis that sprung out several inches in front of him if you pinched his right ear. I didn't know what it was at first: I'd never seen a penis before. But my fantasies adapted accordingly. I dreamed of Dino the great ape thrashing and thumping his chest as he entered my body. I imagined myself bouncing and stuttering on his giant retractable phallus. I imagined tribes of insect-like humans offering young sacrifices to appease his appetite which bananas and carrion alone could not satisfy. I imagined my own screams howling away the silence of the night sky. I dreamed of a baby spider monkey growing inside me, screeching and twisting out of my womb, killing me as I had killed my mother.

Then I'd open my eyes and see no great colossal ape but Dino the second assistant unit director's toy gorilla. Dino the replica monster from a Z-grade horror movie that no one would ever see.

Dino the out-of-work puppet. And I, his master manipulating his body for my own pleasure. It felt good being the master of something. Beauty beasting the Beast.

My father was concerned of course. One year he came into my room while I was folding Dino's mouth into a sulky pout on the bed. I managed to fold Dino's penis back into his anus just in time.

"So how come you don't ever bring anyone home, Naomi?"

(As if I ever had.)

"I don't feel like it, dad!"

"Oh, but you should! A girl your age. You're almost nineteen now, for goodness' sake! The only company you keep is with that damned toy chimp!"

"Dino's my friend, daddy! And he's not a chimp. He's a gorilla."

"I should've thrown that thing out a long time ago! You're too old to be having toys in your bed!"

"But you gave him to me! As a present!"

"I didn't expect you to still have him in your bed until you were eighteen, girl! For God's sake," he screamed. "Grow up, girl! It's just a toy!"

"He's so much more than that!" I cried.

Was he ever. Good God. Was he ever.

Unbeknownst to my father I had in fact begun seeing someone else.

Aldo was many things. By day he greased his hair into the shape of a duck's arse, squeezed his fat neck into a Christmas tie and helped down-and-outers sign on for benefits while he helped them discover their true potential in life: usually as bin-men or warehouse workers. By night he donned a kimono two sizes too small for him and slid up and down a pole for tips at Tiffany's strip club in Aldershot. Aldo had many talents and many tales and many faces and many jobs and many lives. He also had a full-size monkey suit and a copy of the Karma Sutra. We became close friends. Through Aldo I began to realize my dream of creating the Dino I'd always wanted. A real, living, breathing, fucking monkey man.

One night I lay in bed waiting for Aldo to come in through the window as he usually did every Tuesday and Thursday of the week. I waited and thought of his furry gloved hands running over the inside of my thighs before probing into me like playing "Chinese Chopsticks" on a keyboard. A keyboard that writhed and moaned and begged for more more please more more more! I was impatient for his rolling eyes behind the frozen mask of his costume. His silverback horse-haired

frame crushing me deeper and deeper into the mattress. Oh Dino, my Dino! The plastic ape made flesh! Et Plasticus Apus caro factum est!

The plan was simple. I would leave my window open. Gorilla-suited Aldo would climb in. The hunter would claim his prize. The prize would squeak with joy. He would leave as he came. The plan was simple.

But Aldo didn't come in through the window that night. He came through the front door. Quietly, yes. But now he was under my bed. He smelled of piss and shit. He wouldn't come out. I could hear him sobbing and shaking. I poked a banana under the bed for fun to tempt him out. He threw it across the floor. The banana split. This was no role play. This was no joke.

I never heard my father step into the room. He wore socks on his feet that night.

“Still up at this hour, eh?”

“Yes,” I said.

I tried not to look down towards the bed. I could see piss and shit starting to ooze from under it.

“Is everything alright, daddy?”

My father froze as I heard the window open behind me. I turned around. I screamed. There was another gorilla at the window.

But it was the one I knew. It was the one that dressed up for the job centre in the daytime and stripped down for Tiffany's in the night time. It was the rolling eyes trapped behind the face frozen by plastic, glue fluff and plucked horse hair. It was holding a dog-eared copy of the Karma Sutra in one hand and fumbling with its groin in the other. The ape at my window was my ape. It was Aldo.

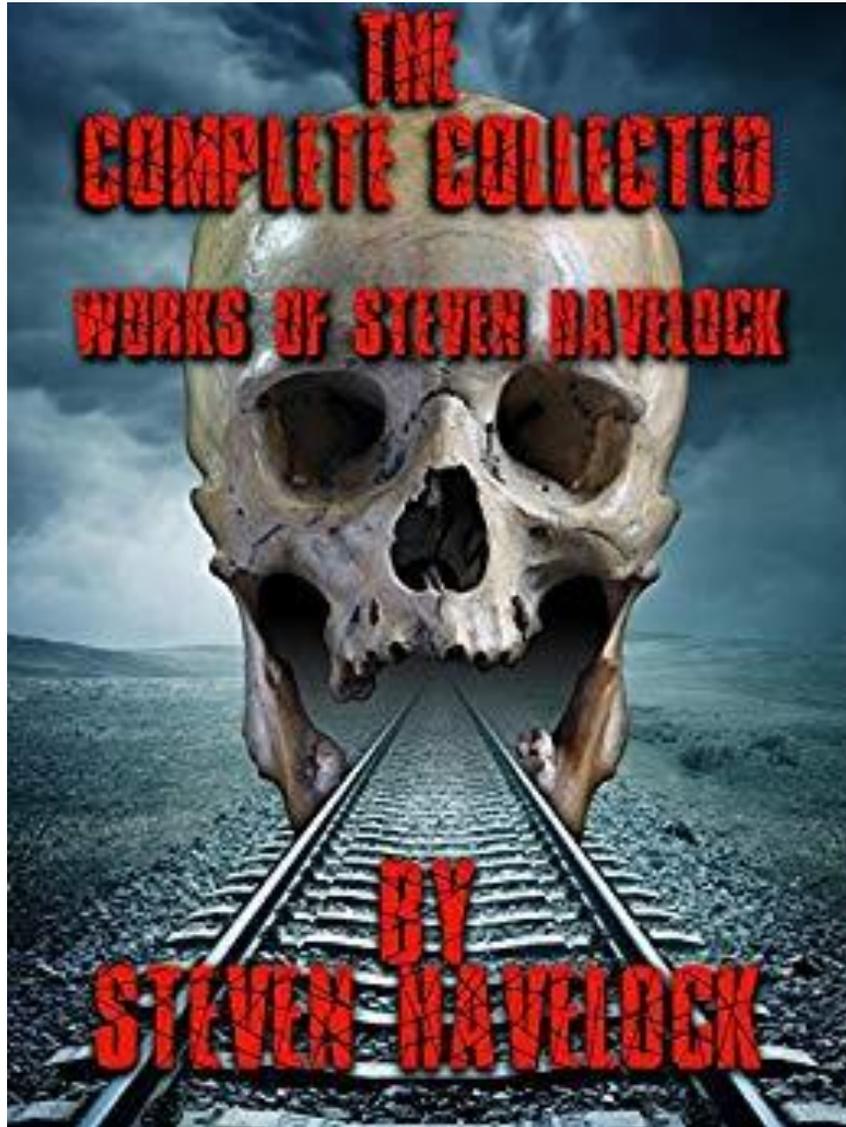
Meanwhile there is another ape under the bed. My bed. Breathing hard. Pissing and shitting all over the floor. Moaning to itself. My father—pissing and shitting all over the floor as well—stutters an explanation.

“Naomi, I can explain...”

Turns out I'm not the only one who dreams of being fucked by a gorilla. These things must run in the family. After we buried Aldo in the back yard together—he broke his neck falling off the ladder outside my window, poor fool—my father and I really made a connection on a level I had never experienced before. Of course it was much harder burying the real ape. Our backyard is so small, you see, and they have such long arms in real life. Maybe we'll move to a bigger house with a vast expansive garden. Somewhere near a zoo or a primate sanctuary. I hear there's one in Dorset.

Call me Naomi. No one else will.

THE END



[Return to Contents](#)

JUDGEMENT DAY by Steven Havelock

Kyle was eighty eight years old. He lay in his hospital bed.

Death is near.

As he thought about his life, a sad weary smile tried to form on his face.

I'm going up.

He thought about his life and was proud of the fact that he could look at himself in the mirror and feel good.

I lived my life the best I could, I have no regrets.

The blood pressure machine started to whine with a high beeping. Instantly nurses were around his bed.

“He’s not going to make it!”

Soon Kyle stopped noticing the whine of the blood pressure machine over the frantic voices of the nurses. He felt himself rising up and up.

Like I'm flying in the clouds.

From far, far away, he heard a voice say “He’s dead.” But this had no real impact on him.

I'm too far away to care...

Günter lay on his hospital bed.

Death is near.

“Nurse...Nurse...”

A young nurse heard him and approached his bed.

“Nurse, I have a confession to make. “

“What do you mean?”

“I need to tell you something.”

“Okay, what is it?”

“Nurse, I was in the war, the Second World War, I was in the German army.”

“Okay.”

“I did some terrible things.”

“What did you do?”

“I killed people, lots and lots of people.”

The nurse didn't know what to say. “Okay...” she said again.

Günter continued. “I feel God won't look on me too favourably with all the crimes I've committed and I'm worried I'm going to be going to hell.”

“Don't worry, you will be fine.”

Günter never spoke another word. A few days later, it happened.

I'm dying.

He felt himself rising up and up until he felt like he was in the clouds.

Kyle found himself in what looked like a small jail cell, except that everything seemed to be made of a bluish white light. He heard soft footsteps in the strange silence that surrounded him. Then a tall woman wearing white was at his cell. The metal bars to the cell automatically slid open.

Kyle was sitting on his bed and the tall woman came in and sat on the single chair in his cell.

“Hi, I'm Emma, your guardian angel,” she said.

“What? I don't understand.”

“I will explain as simply as I can. You are dead and tomorrow is your judgment day, and I'm going to be representing you.”

An irrepressible smile slid across Kyle's face.

I'm going to heaven.

Günter awoke. He was in what looked like a small jail cell.

Everything here is made of a bluish white light.

Just then he heard soft footsteps.

A man dressed all in white appeared in front of his cell. The bars opened automatically. The man entered and sat on the only chair in the small cell, opposite Günter's bed.

“My name is Paul; I'm your guardian angel and tomorrow is your judgment day. I will be representing you.”

Paul explained what would happen the next day and then left. Günter started to shake.

I'm going to hell.

Kyle walked down a long, long corridor and eventually was facing a large white door.

“They are waiting for you on the other side,” said Emma.

Kyle beamed from ear to ear.

He entered. Inside he found himself looking up at a large stone chair, which must have been about ten metres tall and on it sat an elderly man with a long white beard.

‘Justify yourself,’ the bearded man said.

Kyle recounted how he had read the Bible and followed its teachings to the letter. How he had always listened to his conscience and done what he thought God would have wanted him to. The hearing lasted several hours, and the bearded man or Emma didn't interrupt once.

Eventually the bearded man spoke in a loud booming voice. “We will consider your case. Please wait outside.”

An hour later Kyle was brought back into the room for the verdict.

“The life you led was a test,” said the giant sized man in his booming voice. “It was at test to see if you should be allowed to join us the Brethren. The verdict we passed is....”

Günter was led into a room with a large ten metered chair and on it sat a giant sized bearded man.

“Justify yourself,” the giant sized man said in a booming voice.

Günter looked down and recounted how he had killed and killed. Without mercy and without conscience. He said many times that he did not want to murder but was following orders and had no choice. Eventually his throat was dry and his voice was horse.

“Wait outside,” said the giant bearded man.

Günter was led outside and waited about an hour, until eventually he was called in. “The life you led was a test, to see if you are fit to join the Brethren. We have seen your life and are ready to now to pass sentence.”

Kyle looked up in eager anticipation.

The giant bearded man started to laugh. His loud laughter echoed round and round the chamber. Eventually he stopped.

“You have failed the test!” said the loud booming voice.

“We created you and gave you this test to see if you were fit to join the Brethren. We sent down the Holy Book to weed out the weak and gullible from the strong and intelligent. You have led the life of a sheep, falling for the lies and the deceit of the misguiding scriptures”

“What? What...?”

“You have failed and will not be allowed to join the Brethren.”

“Please God, no!”

“Don’t worry you won’t be sent to hell, it does not exist, but you have now been slated for termination. The court of God finds you wanting and weak.”

Two large figures emerged out of the darkness and dragged Kyle screaming and shouting hysterically down the corridor from which he had come.

Günter looked up, sweat forming on his brow and fear running through his veins.

To burn for all eternity.

“We have listened to your life, and how you tried to justify your actions. We sent down the Holy Book to weed out the weak and the sheep from the strong and intelligent.”

“Please God, no!”

“Your life was a test,” said the giant sized man in a loud booming voice. “You have passed the test and shall be allowed to join the Brethren. Welcome to the community.”

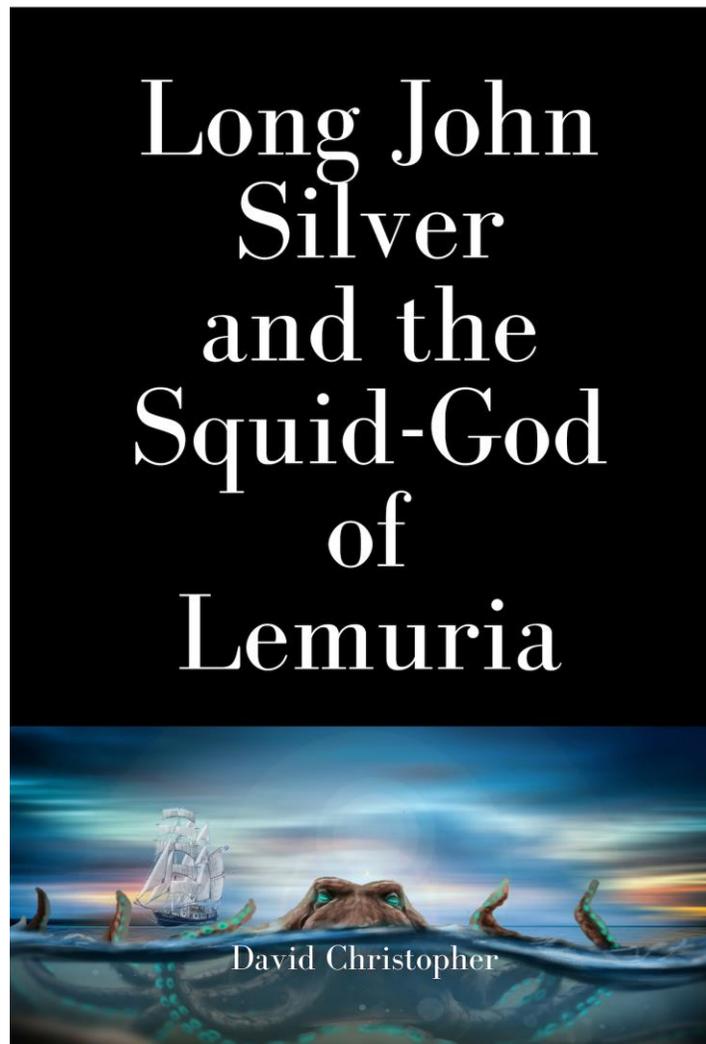
A door opened to the left.

“Come with me,” said Paul smiling.

Günter entered the doorway.

THE END

GONZO PULP PUBLICATIONS
PRESENT



[Return to Contents](#)

A VAMPIRE'S THOUGHTS ON KISSING by Francis-Marie de Chatillon

You know, kissing is a gentle art form; an art that needs to be studied a bit. Some people put it just down to technique; others regard it as a simple short-cut to fucking. Now me, I have a different view. It's a sexual pleasure all on its own. Like masturbating.

See, a woman—well most women anyway—want a bit of love with the sex. Now, don't get me wrong, there's plenty of women who just want uncomplicated, give-it-to-me sex! And why not? Nothing wrong in it. Except.... Except that most women want a bit of tenderness at some point. Sometimes not a lot. Just a bit. You can bang 'em bandy later. Be remorseless with it even. But a bit of a kiss is a good entre, so to speak. Kissing is how you give them the big bazooka! But, funny thing is, most guys don't know how to kiss. Haven't got a clue. They think they have. They'd swear on their mother's graves.

Now, Vampires can kiss. Oh yes! Make no mistake. So, let me give you some tips.

Kissing should start slow and soft. It should have some promise to it right at the beginning. It should tantalise. It should suggest deeper and more profound erotic pleasures. Get what I'm saying? Promise. Tantalise. Suggest. So this Vampire is not straight in there with the tongue. Oh no! So, brush her lips tenderly with yours at first. Whisper her name once and then whisper it again, say, for good measure.

Don't forget your hands. That's another thing. The good kiss is a combination of actions. So just flirt a little with her hair as you start the kissing. Again be soft and sensual. Don't hurry it. Use your fingers lightly on the back of her neck, brushing it with your fingernails--she'll love that shit! Feel her hips gently. Squeeze a little. Let her know you like them. All the time kiss softly, slowly. Don't hurry. Occasionally break away for a second and look meaningfully into her eyes and then continue. But don't make the break too long--that's really important! So remember it, OK?

Now, gradually turn the heat up. Make the contact between your lips and hers stronger. Pull her to you so that you have Full Frontal Contact (FFC). Start breathing a little harder at this point. Now use the tongue. Search for her tongue. Make it eager but not urgent. That'll come later. Oh Yes! Start to run your fingers up through her hair a little. Let her hair fall back down. Be eager but not rough. Let her feel your passion rising. But don't get too in front of the ball here! Take your time. No rush. By now she should be responding nicely. Again momentary break away; give her eye contact; whisper her name and kiss again. Build the intensity until you can feel her boil.

Next stage is The Full-On Kiss (FOK). You take the back of her head and you pull her firmly to your mouth. Squeeze the back of her head a little as you do it. Softly massage the back of her head with your fingertips as you kiss her. Make it seem like you're talking to her with your fingers when you do. Know what I mean? Make it feel like you're talking urgent here! Use your tongue harder. At this point don't be shy. Move your hand up from her hip to round her back, so it's a Full Embrace (FE). Remember: Full-On Kiss = Full Embrace. Just keep it coming. Then start Last Phase Operations (LPO).

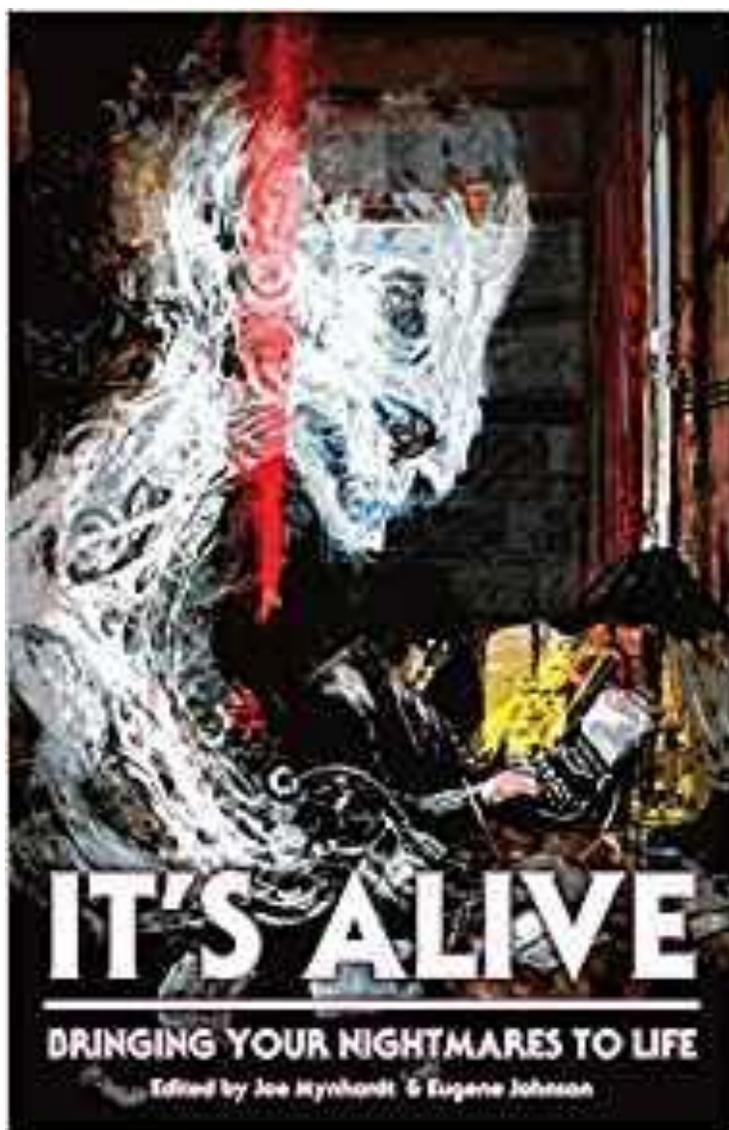
LPO. This is where you start some touching as you kiss. I usually go for the stomach first. Move the hand there and just squeeze a little. Gently. Sensually. Let it linger. Why the stomach first? It's because women carry their unborn in there. You're signalling sex here to them! And big time baby! Keep kissing. Here's another good tip: increase the rate of your breathing. But don't make it sound like you're snorting coke or something. Then, slowly move to her breasts. Caress her nipples lightly with your fingers at first. Stroke ever so gently as if touching a butterfly. And don't hurry that bit!

Now, a few moments later, knead her whole breasts tenderly, and then move on with firmness. Let her know you want her. Like your whole body fucking needs her. And as you do this artistry, let out a long, soft but audible moan of unambiguous desire. Let the intensity build. At this point make Close Thigh Contact (CTH).

So, for CTC, firmly push your thigh up against hers. Let there be no doubt you're signalling body to body contact. Oh, and make you lips and tongue work a little harder as well. All actions must synergize. Then gradually move you hand down her body to between her legs. Cop a feel, why not? At this point this bird's ready for the oven and a good stuffing.

Then break the kiss! Go on to Last Moves (LM.) Slide your lips down to her neck, whispering her name over and over as you do. Kiss her there gently. Also mutter some words like, "God, I want you, do you know that?" Anything actually will do, however trite, provided it's along those lines. She's totally yours now. That's when you bite down really hard and dine well.....

THE END



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[Return to Contents](#)

THE FRUIT OF DEATH by Rob Bliss

The Fruit of Death sat by the stream, fallen from a high branch, and was shaped like a skull. The two people, Aelph and Emega, did not know what a skull was because they had always been alive. Neither knew that there were bones beneath their skin.

Since hunger was something always to be obeyed, they each cradled the fruit in their muddy palms and sank teeth deep into the sweet watery flesh. A single bite was both eating and drinking since the fruit's pulp was thick and saturated with juice. It gave, and the couple took, and neither was to blame.

When they had shared and eaten the fruit, they were still hungry, so they looked for more. And found many more skulls hanging from branches, half-sunken into mud, caught in nets of tangled grasses, floating in still pools. Frantically, they raced from skull to skull and sank their dull teeth into the hard rinds and soft eyes gazing back at them.

Bellies full, they still wanted more of the fruit, to give more of their bodies than just their stomachs to it. Living without pain and death, they scratched, chewed and tore nails against each other's breast bones and dug through layers of skin. Blood leaked out, so they smeared it up with their hands and painted each other's tongues to add salt to their sweetened palates.

Stones broke through rib and solar plexus, pieces plucked out, twisted free from sinews, to expose the bloated red fruit throbbing in the depths of their chests. Sharpened flint shards sawed vein and muscle until they each removed the other's heart, and sat the pulsing muscles side by side on the grass.

Into each chest cavity, the couple placed a fresh ripe skull. They sat back to admire each other's centre, stilled, unbeating. Aelph leaned forward to kiss Emega's green skull heart, but he felt so much temptation that he couldn't stop himself from taking a bite. Emega giggled and moaned. She leaned forward to bite her lover's heart, and to watch and hear him swoon before he fell back on the grass with a smile.

The Broken-Footed Man hobbled into view, hung his head over the eyes of Aelph. Didn't return the smile that shone up to him. The Man lowered a segmented finger down to press gently against the soft and ruined centre of Aelph's chest. Mud and grass had already begun growing over the skull, swallowing bits of bone, linking together snapped strands of sinew and coils of severed muscle.

The Broken-Footed Man saw a similar wound at the centre of Emega's chest as she sat up straight, held her feet, and rocked playfully back and forth on her behind. She smiled, but the Man did not. He glanced around the lush grass field and saw skulls whole, half-eaten, rotting slowly with tiny bruises.

"I punish you with life," he said to Emega through thin, dry lips. Aelph sat up and shuffled to the side of his love, where they clasped each other, held on for dear life. The Broken-Footed Man said to both, "Death you will only enjoy once again after you have suffered life."

Aelph and Emega were plucked off the grass by a strong wind and flown through the sky to land on a beach of jagged stones.

They were allowed the mercy of keeping their skull hearts, though each lived long lives. Every day they longed for death, built skulls from stones and mud and sand, but such totems could not feed. They formed gods of death and wrote stories of terrible vengeance, of innocent people being butchered at a god's whim, of evil people being rewarded for baptizing others with death. Those who loved life were despised; those who worshipped death were heroes. So many sculpted gods bequeathed the righteous with decapitation, severed limbs, hearts ripped from their chests.

Aelph and Emega forged an empire of killers—psychotic children who used their higher brain functions to create new methods of torment, to bring people pain before they sipped the sweet juice of Death

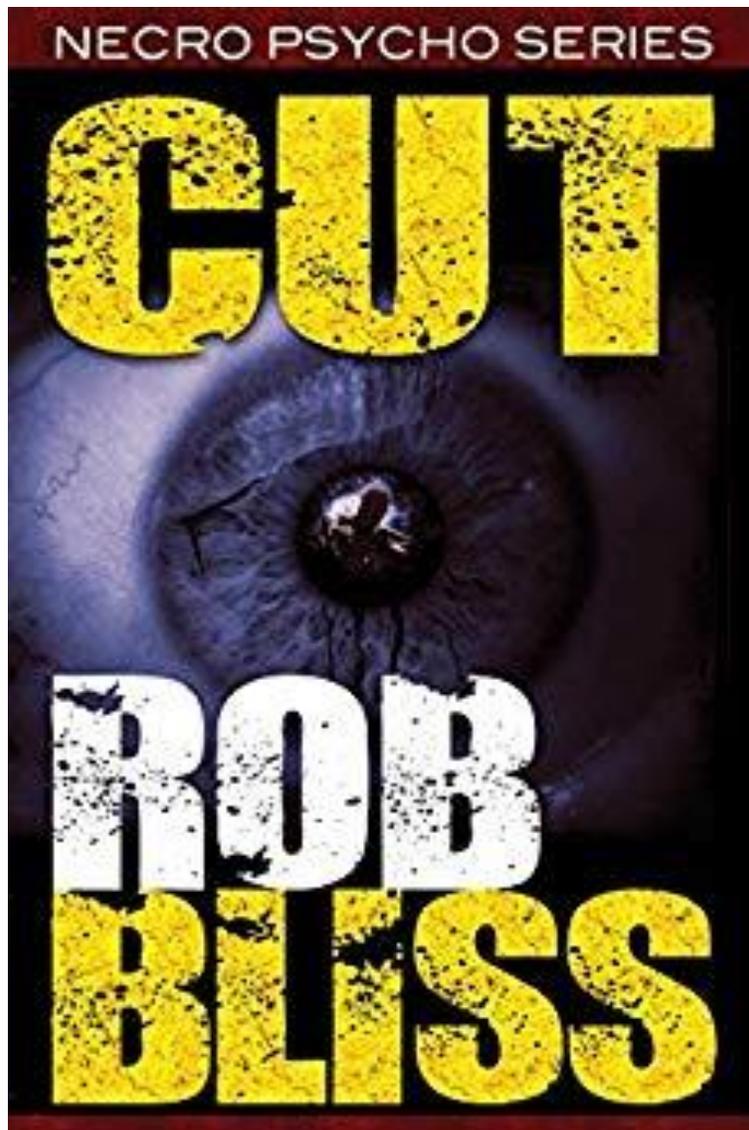
The Broken-Footed Man watched the cast-out generations rise and fall and knew he had given a blessing when he was actually trying to create a curse. He had hoped for longing and loneliness for his couple, but they had instead clung to each other.

So to make his wish come true, he made one die first, and the other live on. A deep sorrow possessed the living, longing for the dead, and made the remaining life a hell.

The Broken-Footed Man was well-pleased.

THE END

[Available from Amazon](#)



[Return to Contents](#)

THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Forty-Six

Ward followed where he was led, uttering not a sound. Yellow lights mounted in the walls lit the way.

As they approached the arena, the ear-splitting the noise from the shouted chants grew ever louder, and ear-splitting. Drums and horns bellowed out wild and feverish rhythms, singers sang and dancers danced. Spotlights chased each other about the playing field, dashing from one point to another with dizzying speed.

The procession pushed Ward into the arena. The guards and workmen pushed themselves away from Ward, leaving him half-standing, half-swimming in the stadium.

As the procession entered, a huge cheer rocked the arena. Ward found himself surrounded on every side by an audience of hundreds shouting his name. Over his head, below his feet, to the left, to the right, before him and behind him. Everywhere he looked were countless faces shouting and calling for him.

“Car-TER!, Car-TER!, Car-TER!” came the chants.

Carter saw, in the centre of the playing field, a strange construction of cages and tunnels, towers, ladders and slides, all built of heavy wire. Flashes of flames and blue bolts of electricity shot through it.

Ward saw Turhan Mot and Mokem Bet wading up to him. They both wore elaborate clothing, blue and white robes tied about their waists, with wide leather belts studded with jewels. They both smirked at Ward as they came near.

This was to be the moment when Turhan Mot should have been reinstated to his former glory. That his fleet was destroyed at the battle for Callisto should have been forgotten. He should have been remembered only for being the first to launch any such attack. And when Ward was finally slaughtered in the arena, before a thousand witnesses, and more, Turhan Mot’s revival would have been complete.

Indeed, Turhan Mot had it in his mind that, once he had seen Ward die in the arena, he would then set out in search of Ward’s friend, Mud, to send him to the arena as well. With that goal, he could surely begin putting together his fleet.

And so, knowing full well that Ward could not possibly escape the trap that he had so carefully set, Turhan Mot openly gloated as he approached his prisoner.

The guard of six men surrounded Ward. Unholstering their pistols, they aimed squarely at his head.

“Don’t make a move, man,” ordered the guard who had spoken to him earlier. “Maybe you might live. Got it?”

Ward simply nodded his head.

“Okay? Got it?” the guard repeated.

“Yeah. I got it,” Ward answered.

“Awright.” The guard turned to Turhan Mot and nodded his head.

“This guy’s gonna talk to you for a minute. Then we’re gonna start the big show.”

“Yeah. Sure,” Ward answered.

Turhan Mot came near. He laid his hand on the shoulder of the guard who had spoken.

“Most excellently done,” he said. “We thank you.”

Turhan Mot then turned to Carter Ward and stared, grinning, for many long moments.

“So,” he began. “We finally lay eyes upon this man. This... Carter Ward. Know it now, this is the place where he shall die. This arena shall be his grave. A grave, that is, for those portions we do not sell. As Carter Ward can possibly guess, there exists quite a demand among some of my acquaintances for even a single mouthful of his flesh. The entire body should will sell very, very handily, all one hundred and sixty pounds of him. That should pay us back quite nicely for the “Grand Marquis.”

“This is how you die, Carter Ward. Here, in this place, in this arena. While we watch. We shall send our fighters to you, and you shall fight them until you die. Does Carter Ward have anything to say to us, the instruments of your extinction?”

Turhan Mot leaned back, and allowed Ward to see the expansive smile that stretched across the lower half of his face.

Ward, who stopped looking at Turhan Mot the moment he began to speak, simply closed his eyes, covered his mouth, and yawned.

Turhan Mot said nothing. He merely turned to Mokem Bet and snapped, “Bring her!”

Moken Bet pushed himself off, and, half-walking and half-wading through the thin gravity of the asteroid, he disappeared into a tunnel leading out from the spherical arena. A moment later he returned.

With him was Lacey. She hobbled before Mokem Bet, who prodded her with an electrified baton. He sent a shock through her, which sent her stumbling, her body jerking with pain. All for

the spectacle of it.

Ward watched her approach, with Mokem Bet cruelly pushing her on. Lacey was an all right kid, he thought. Too bad she got herself into this shit show.

She was dressed only in a cerulean satin thong studded with sequins, and a necklace of blue diamonds. Her expression was one of utter despair. When her eyes fell upon Ward, that despair instantly vanished away. The relief on her face was sunlight cutting through a grey bank of clouds.

Lacey rushed ahead, leaving Mokem Bet behind. Bounding through the air and to the rising cheers of the crowds watching, she at last caught up to Carter Ward and Turhan Mot. She threw herself at Ward, crushing her body against his. She buried her face against Ward's naked chest. Her tears streamed in cascades upon his naked flesh. Lacey tried to speak, but every time she tried, the air in her throat choked her.

Ward put an arm around Lacey's shoulder, more to keep his balance than in any attempt to give her solace. They'd look ridiculous, spinning in the air. So he was able to steady the two of them.

"Your companion, I believe," Turhan Mot said with a sneer. "Keep her alive as long as you can."

Hearing Turhan Mot speak, Lacey opened her eyes and lifted her head. She stared into Ward's face.

Ward shrugged his shoulders, but he didn't speak.

"Hmph," Turhan Mot grunted.

He turned away from Ward, and looked up into the audience where Horst Dal had his private box seats. Large as a small apartment with several rooms, Horst Dal's private suite gave an expansive view of the playing field, sometimes called the 'fighting field'.

Interior walls were lined with visiscreens that gave views of every angle. The cages and the labyrinthine construction built of them were very closely monitored, with dozens of cameras recording everything. A kitchen, a dining room, a large viewing room and an opulent lavatory made up the interior of Horst Dal's suite. An ample balcony, with a capacity for holding up to twenty people, and offering a generous view of the fighting field, completed the appointments of Horst Dal's private suite.

Horst Dal stood at the balcony, overlooking the parley between Turhan Mot and Carter Ward. Next to Horst Dal there stood his friend, the pirate, Yamir. Behind them and standing on either side was Horst Dal's entourage and followers. All were sumptuously dressed in silks, jewels and diadems.

Seeing Turhan Mot turn toward him, Horst Dal acknowledged the pirate with a bow of the head.

“Oh, Horst Dal, Grand Host of our festivities,” Turhan Mot announced. A microphone secreted in his robes sent his voice booming and echoing all throughout the stadium.

“It gives his servant great delight to present to him, the master of Astra Palace, this man, Carter Ward! Carter Ward, the man who has brought some of our best plans to ruin.

“Now, he shall pay for his arrogance. Now, Carter Ward will face some of our best fighters, man, animal and machine. With him, his delightful charge, the girl named ‘Lacey’. No, no... I am sorry,” Turhan Mot interrupted himself. Many shouts of protest came loud from the audience. Offers of huge sums of money to spare her and to allow the purchase her came from every corner.

“It grieves him, Turhan Mot,” he said, referring to himself by name, “Yes, it grieves him deeply, to be the instrument by which such rare pulchritude such be ushered from this world.” The ancient sadist said it with a smirk that said plainly that he was not only untroubled by the instrumentality that had been pushed upon him, but that he took positive delight in destroying anything beautiful that fell into his bloodless clutches.

“But sadly,” Turhan Mot continued, “Beauty is treachery. And this treacherous child has endangered every living thing here at Astra Palace, indeed, she has threatened the very existence of Astra Palace itself.

“Let it never be said that Horst Dal has ever been careless with the safety or the privacy of his guests.”

Turhan Mot paused and threw his arm up in an expansive gesture to point Horst Dal out to the crowds. A cheer rose up and resounded throughout the interior of the vast and crowded arena. Horst Dal smiled, and acknowledged the cheer with a bow.

“Do not speak of Astra Palace,” Turhan Mot declaimed. “No, not so much as a single breath of it. Do not even give utterance to its name.

“And we all know this thing, never once to speak of Astra Palace, except that we jeopardize its very existence, and the very lives over every living thing here. For it is in secrecy we have our strength and our power here.

“But the girl Lacey did speak. Not only but once. No, she spoke of Astra Palace many, many times. Why? Did she betray us all for money? Perhaps she was only trying to impress a boyfriend?”

The crowd in the stands began responding with scattered shouts and curses. Soon a chant began to manifest itself through the disparate noises.

“Death to Lacey!

“Death to Lacey!

“Death to Lacey!”

Someone somewhere within the throng decided that the chant was either not cruel, or rude, enough, and the chant metamorphosed into

“Kill the bitch!
“Kill the bitch!
“Kill the bitch!”

And so it was that the deaths of a girl called ‘Lacey’ and Carter Ward were settled by a mob.

From their expressions, it was clear that Turhan Mot and Mokem Bet were enjoying themselves immensely. Horst Dal and Yamir, likewise, were taking great pleasure in the scene unfolding before them.

The audience, it hardly bears mentioning, showed its appreciation with a series of deafening chants and shouts. Liquor flowed freely, and the pills, smoke and other drugs passed from hand to hand. Grills filled the air with thick clouds of barbequed beef, pork and chicken.

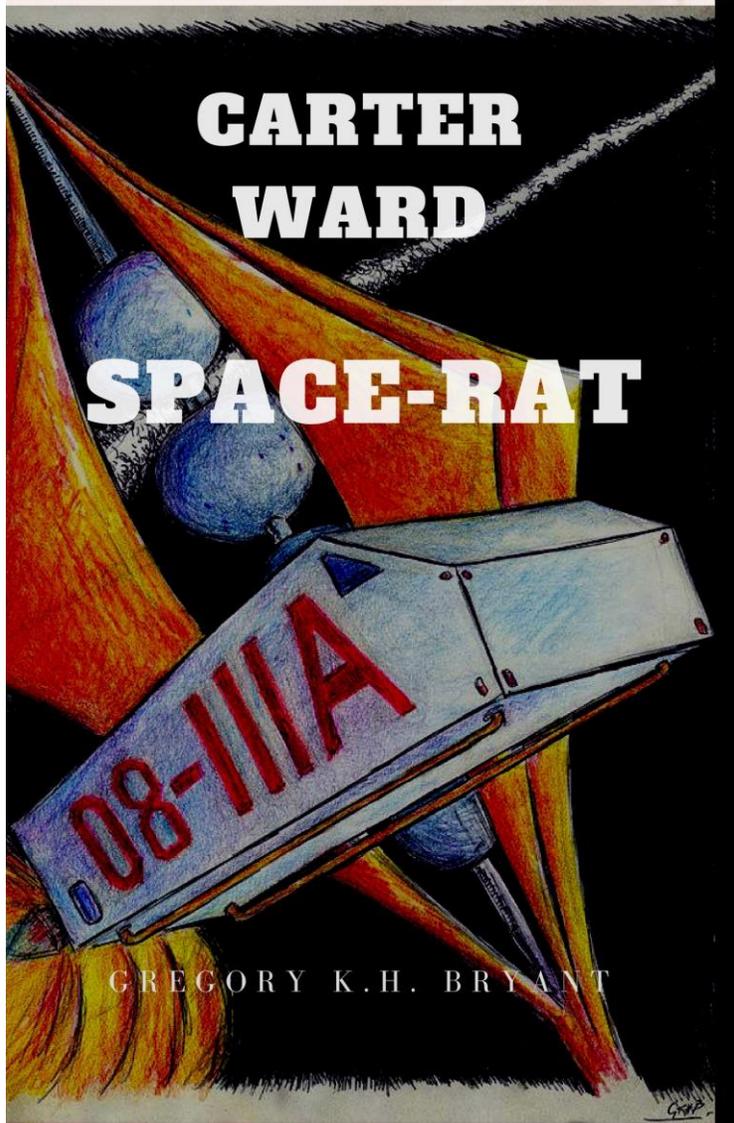
Drums beat loud, horns played louder. Spontaneous orchestrations arose in multiple places throughout the crowds. Men and women both threw off their clothes and danced wildly among the seats.

“We shall explain,” Turhan Mot hissed into Carter Ward’s ear, while the crowds entertained themselves with chants, songs, drinking, drugs and sex.

“There, in the maze, you will find weapons. You will also find death, if you are careless. Fighters and warriors will come at you and fight you and eventually kill you. You are not here to win. You are here to die. Just keep it entertaining.”

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

Now available from Schlock! Publications: [*Carter Ward—Space Rat*](#) by Gregory KH Bryant.



[Return to Contents](#)

ERIC BRIGHTEYES by H Rider Haggard

VI: How Asmund the Priest Was Betrothed To Unna

For a moment there was silence, for all that company was wonderstruck at the greatness of the deed. Then they cheered and cheered again, and to Eric it seemed that he slept, and the sound of shouting reached him but faintly, as though he heard through snow. Suddenly he woke and saw a man rush at him with axe aloft. It was Mord, Ospakar's son, mad at his father's overthrow. Eric sprang aside, or the blow had been his bane, and, as he sprang, smote with his fist, and it struck heavily on the head of Mord above the ear, so that the axe flew from his hand, and he fell senseless on his father in the snow.

Now swords flashed out, and men ringed round Eric to guard him, and it came near to the spilling of blood, for the people of Ospakar gnashed their teeth to see so great a hero overthrown by a youngling, while the southern folk of Middalhof and Ran River rejoiced loudly, for Eric was dear to their hearts.

“Down swords,” cried Asmund the priest, “and haul yon carcass from the snow.”

This then they did, and Ospakar sat up, breathing in great gasps, the blood running from his mouth and ears, and he was an evil sight to see, for what with blood and snow and rage his face was like the face of the Swinefell Goblin.

But Swanhild spoke in the ear of Gudruda:

“Here,” she said, looking at Eric, “we two have a man worth loving, foster-sister.”

“Ay,” answered Gudruda, “worth and well worth!”

Now Asmund drew near and before all men kissed Eric Brighteyes on the brow.

“In sooth,” he said, “thou art a mighty man, Eric, and the glory of the south. This I prophesy of thee: that thou shalt do deeds such as have not been done in Iceland. Thou hast ill been served, for a knave unknown greased thy shoes. Yon swarthy Ospakar, the most mighty of all men in Iceland, could not overthrow thee, though, like a wolf, he fastened his fangs in thee, and, like a coward, stamped upon thy naked foot. Take thou the great sword that thou hast won and wear it worthily.”

Now Eric took snow and wiped the blood from his brow. Then he grasped Whitefire and drew it from the scabbard, and high aloft flashed the war-blade. Thrice he wheeled it round his head, then sang aloud:

“Fast, yestermorn, down Golden Falls,
Fared young Eric to thy feast,
Asmund, father of Gudruda—
Maid whom much he longs to clasp.

But to-day on Giant Blacktooth
Hath he done a needful deed:
Hurling him in heaped-up snowdrift;
Winning Whitefire for his wage.”

And again he sang:

“Lord, if in very truth thou thinkest
Brighteyes is a man midst men,
Swear to him, the stalwart suitor,
Hansel of thy sweet maid’s hand:
Whom, long loved, to win, down Goldfoss
Swift he sped through frost and foam;
Whom, to win, to troll-like Ogre,
He, ‘gainst Whitefire, waged his eye.”

Men thought this well sung, and turned to hear Asmund’s answer, nor must they wait long.

“Eric,” he said, “I will promise thee this, that if thou goest on as thou hast begun, I will give Gudruda in marriage to no other man.”

“That is good tidings, lord,” said Eric.

“This I say further: in a year I will give thee full answer according as to how thou dost bear thyself between now and then, for this is no light gift thou askest; also that, if ye will it, you twain may now plight troth, for the blame shall be yours if it is broken, and not mine, and I give thee my hand on it.”

Eric took his hand, and Gudruda heard her father’s words and happiness shone in her dark eyes, and she grew faint for very joy. And now Eric turned to her, all torn and bloody from the fray, the great sword in his hand, and he spoke thus:

“Thou hast heard thy father’s words, Gudruda? Now it seems that there is no great need of troth-pledging between us two. Still, here before all men I ask thee, if thou dost love me and art willing to take me to husband?”

Gudruda looked up into his face, and answered in a sweet, clear voice that could be heard by all:

“Eric, I say to thee now, what I have said before, that I love thee alone of all men, and, if it be my father’s wish, I will wed no other whilst thou dost remain true to me and hold me dear.”

“Those are good words,” said Eric. “Now, in pledge of them, swear this troth of thine upon my sword that I have won.”

Gudruda smiled, and, taking great Whitefire in her hand, she said the words again, and, in pledge of them, kissed the bright blade.

Then Eric took back the war-sword and spoke thus: "I swear that I will love thee, and thee only, Gudruda the Fair, Asmund's daughter, whom I have desired all my days; and, if I fail of this my oath, then our troth is at an end, and thou mayst wed whom thou wilt," and in turn he put his lips upon the sword, while Swanhild watched them do the oath.

Now Ospakar was recovered from the fight, and he sat there upon the snow, with bowed head, for he knew well that he had won the greatest shame, and had lost both wife and sword. Black rage filled his heart as he listened, and he sprang to his feet.

"I came hither, Asmund," he said, "to ask this maid of thine in marriage, and methinks that had been a good match for her and thee. But I have been overthrown by witchcraft of this man in a wrestling-bout, and thereby lost my good sword; and now I must seem to hear him betrothed to the maid before me."

"Thou hast heard aright, Ospakar," said Asmund, "and thy wooing is soon sped. Get thee back whence thou camest and seek a wife in thine own quarter, for thou art unfit in age and aspect to have so sweet a maid. Moreover, here in the south we hold men of small account, however great and rich they be, who do not shame to seek to overcome a foe by foul means. With my own eyes I saw thee stamp on the naked foot of Eric, Thorgrimur's son; with my own eyes I saw thee, like a wolf, fasten that black fang of thine upon him—there is the mark of it; and, as for the matter of the greased shoes, thou knowest best what hand thou hadst in it."

"I had no hand. If any did this thing, it was Groa the Witch, thy Finnish bedmate. For the rest, I was mad and know not what I did. But hearken, Asmund: ill shall befall thee and thy house, and I will ever be thy foe. Moreover, I will yet wed this maid of thine. And now, thou Eric, hearken also: I will have another game with thee. This one was but the sport of boys; when we meet again—and the time shall not be long—swords shall be aloft, and thou shalt learn the play of men. I tell thee that I will slay thee, and tear Gudruda, shrieking, from thy arms to be my wife! I tell thee that, with yonder good sword Whitefire, I will yet hew off thy head!"—and he choked and stopped.

"Thou art much foam and little water," said Eric. "These things are easily put to proof. If thou willest it, to-morrow I will come with thee to a holmgang, and there we may set the twigs and finish what we have begun to-day."

"I cannot do that, for thou hast my sword; and, till I am suited with another weapon, I may fight no holmgang. Still, fear not: we shall soon meet with weapons aloft and byrnie on breast."

"Never too soon can the hour come, Blacktooth," said Eric, and turning on his heel, he limped to the hall to clothe himself afresh. On the threshold of the men's door he met Groa the Witch.

"Thou didst put grease upon my shoes, carline and witch-hag that thou art," he said.

"It is not true, Brighteyes."

“There thou liest, and for all this I will repay thee. Thou art not yet the wife of Asmund, nor shalt be, for a plan comes into my head about it.”

Groa looked at him strangely. “If thou speakest so, take heed to thy meat and drink,” she said. “I was not born among the Finns for nothing; and know, I am still minded to wed Asmund. For thy shoes, I would to the Gods that they were Hell-shoon, and that I was now binding them on thy dead feet.”

“Oh! the cat begins to spit,” said Eric. “But know this: thou mayest grease my shoes—fit work for a carline!—but thou mayest never bind them on. Thou art a witch, and wilt come to the end of witches; and what thy daughter is, that I will not say,” and he pushed past her and entered the hall.

Presently Asmund came to seek Eric there, and prayed him to be gone to his stead on Ran River. The horses of Ospakar had strayed, and he must stop at Middalhof till they were found; but, if these two should abide under the same roof, bloodshed would come of it, and that Asmund knew.

Eric said yea to this, and, when he had rested a while, he kissed Gudruda, and, taking a horse, rode away to Coldback, bearing the sword Whitefire with him, and for a time he saw no more of Ospakar.

When he came there, his mother Saevuna greeted him as one risen from the dead, and hung about his neck. Then he told her all that had come to pass, and she thought it a marvellous story, and sorrowed that Thorgrimur, her husband, was not alive to know it. But Eric mused a while, and spoke.

“Mother,” he said, “now my uncle Thorod of Greenfell is dead, and his daughter, my cousin Unna, has no home. She is a fair woman and skilled in all things. It comes into my mind that we should bid her here to dwell with us.”

“Why, I thought thou wast betrothed to Gudruda the Fair,” said Saevuna. “Wherefore, then, wouldst thou bring Unna hither?”

“For this cause,” said Eric; “because it seems that Asmund the Priest wearies of Groa the Witch, and would take another wife, and I wish to draw the bands between us tighter, if it may befall so.”

“Groa will take it ill,” said Saevuna.

“Things cannot be worse between us than they are now, therefore I do not fear Groa,” he answered.

“It shall be as thou wilt, son; to-morrow we will send to Unna and bid her here, if it pleases her to come.”

Now Ospakar stayed three more days at Middalhof, till his horses were found, and he was fit to travel, for Eric had shaken him sorely. But he had no words with Gudruda and few with Asmund. Still, he saw Swanhild, and she bid him to be of good cheer, for he should yet have Gudruda. For now that the maid had passed from him the mind of Ospakar was set in winning her. Björn also, Asmund's son, spoke words of good comfort to him, for he envied Eric his great fame, and he thought the match with Blacktooth would be good. And so at length Ospakar rode away to Swinefell with all his company; but Gizur, his son, left his heart behind.

For Swanhild had not been idle this while. Her heart was sore, but she must follow her ill-nature, and so she had put out her woman's strength and beguiled Gizur into loving her. But she did not love him at all, and the temper of Asmund the Priest was so angry that Gizur dared not ask her in marriage. So nothing was said of the matter.

Now Unna came to Coldback, to dwell with Saevuna, Eric's mother, and she was a fair and buxom woman. She had been once wedded, but within a month of her marriage her husband was lost at sea, this two years gone. At first Gudruda was somewhat jealous of this coming of Unna to Coldback; but Eric showed her what was in his mind, and she fell into the plan, for she hated and feared Groa greatly, and desired to be rid of her.

Since this matter of the greasing of Eric's wrestling-shoes great loathing of Groa had come into Asmund's mind, and he bethought him often of those words that his wife Gudruda the Gentle spoke as she lay dying, and grieved that the oath which he swore then had in part been broken. He would have no more to do with Groa now, but he could not be rid of her; and, notwithstanding her evil doings, he still loved Swanhild. But Groa grew thin with spite and rage, and wandered about the place glaring with her great black eyes, and people hated her more and more.

Now Asmund went to visit at Coldback, and there he saw Unna, and was pleased with her, for she was a blithe woman and a bonny. The end of it was that he asked her in marriage of Eric; at which Brighteyes was glad, but said that he must know Unna's mind. Unna hearkened, and did not say no, for though Asmund was somewhat gone in years, still he was an upstanding man, wealthy in lands, goods, and moneys out at interest, and having many friends. So they plighted troth, and the wedding-feast was to be in the autumn after hay-harvest. Now Asmund rode back to Middalhof somewhat troubled at heart, for these tidings must be told to Groa, and he feared her and her witchcraft. In the hall he found her, standing alone.

"Where hast thou been, lord?" she asked.

"At Coldback," he answered.

"To see Unna, Eric's cousin, perchance?"

"That is so."

"What is Unna to thee, then, lord?"

“This much, that after hay-harvest she will be my wife, and that is ill news for thee, Groa.”

Now Groa turned and grasped fiercely at the air with her thin hands. Her eyes started out, foam was on her lips, and she shook in her fury like a birch-tree in the wind, looking so evil that Asmund drew back a little way, saying:

“Now a veil is lifted from thee and I see thee as thou art. Thou hast cast a glamour over me these many years, Groa, and it is gone.”

“Mayhap, Asmund Asmundson—mayhap, thou knowest me; but I tell thee that thou shalt see me in a worse guise before thou weddest Unna. What! have I borne the greatest shame, lying by thy side these many years, and shall I live to see a rival, young and fair, creep into my place with honour? That I will not while runes have power and spells can conjure the evil thing upon thee. I call down ruin on thee and thine—yea and on Brighteyes also, for he has brought this thing to pass. Death take ye all! May thy blood no longer run in mortal veins anywhere on the earth! Go down to Hela, Asmund, and be forgotten!” and she began to mutter runes swiftly.

Now Asmund turned white with wrath. “Cease thy evil talk,” he said, “or thou shalt be hurled as a witch into Goldfoss pool.”

“Into Goldfoss pool?—yea, there I may lie. I see it!—I seem to see this shape of mine rolling where the waters boil fiercest—but thine eyes shall never see it! Thy eyes are shut, and shut are the eyes of Unna, for ye have gone before!—I do but follow after,” and thrice Groa shrieked aloud, throwing up her arms, then fell foaming on the sanded floor.

“An evil woman and a fey!” said Asmund as he called people to her. “It had been better for me if I had never seen her dark face.”

Now it is to be told that Groa lay beside herself for ten full days, and Swanhild nursed her. Then she found her sense again, and craved to see Asmund, and spoke thus to him:

“It seems to me, lord, if indeed it be aught but a vision of my dreams, that before this sickness struck me I spoke mad and angry words against thee, because thou hast plighted troth to Unna, Thorod’s daughter.”

“That is so, in truth,” said Asmund.

“I have to say this, then, lord: that most humbly I crave thy pardon for my ill words, and ask thee to put them away from thy mind. Sore heart makes sour speech, and thou knowest well that, howsoever great my faults, at least I have always loved thee and laboured for thee, and methinks that in some fashion thy fortunes are the debtor to my wisdom. Therefore when my ears heard that thou hadst of a truth put me away, and that another woman comes an honoured wife to rule in Middalhof, my tongue forgot its courtesy, and I spoke words that are of all words the farthest from my mind. For I know well that I grow old, and have put off that beauty with which I was adorned of yore, and that held thee to me. ‘Carline’ Eric Brighteyes named me, and ‘carline’ I am—an old hag, no more! Now, forgive me, and, in memory of all that has been between us, let

me creep to my place in the ingle and still watch and serve thee and thine till my service is outworn. Out of Ran's net I came to thee, and, if thou drivest me hence, I tell thee that I will lie down and die upon thy threshold, and when thou sinkest into eld surely the memory of it shall grieve thee."

Thus she spoke and wept much, till Asmund's heart softened in him, and, though with a doubting mind, he said it should be as she willed.

So Groa stayed on at Middalhof, and was lowly in her bearing and soft of speech.

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

[Return to Contents](#)

THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

Chapter XXVI: The Wooing of Lakla

I had slept soundly and dreamlessly; I wakened quietly in the great chamber into which Rador had ushered O'Keefe and myself after that culminating experience of crowded, nerve-racking hours—the facing of the Three.

Now, lying gazing upward at the high-vaulted ceiling, I heard Larry's voice:

“They look like birds.” Evidently he was thinking of the Three; a silence—then: “Yes, they look like birds—and they look, and it's meaning no disrespect to them I am at all, they look like lizards”—and another silence— “they look like some sort of gods, and, by the good sword-arm of Brian Boru, they look human, too! And it's none of them they are either, so what—what the—what the sainted St. Bridget are they?” Another short silence, and then in a tone of awed and absolute conviction: “That's it, sure! That's what they are—it all hangs in—they couldn't be anything else—”

He gave a whoop; a pillow shot over and caught me across the head.

“Wake up!” shouted Larry. “Wake up, ye seething caldron of fossilized superstitions! Wake up, ye boggy-haunted man of scientific unwisdom!”

Under pillow and insults I bounced to my feet, filled for a moment with quite real wrath; he lay back, roaring with laughter, and my anger was swept away.

“Doc,” he said, very seriously, after this, “I know who the Three are!”

“Yes?” I queried, with studied sarcasm.

“Yes?” he mimicked. “Yes! Ye—ye” He paused under the menace of my look, grinned. “Yes, I know,” he continued. “They're of the Tuatha De, the old ones, the great people of Ireland, that's who they are!”

I knew, of course, of the Tuatha De Danann, the tribes of the god Danu, the half-legendary, half-historical clan who found their home in Erin some four thousand years before the Christian era, and who have left so deep an impress upon the Celtic mind and its myths.

“Yes,” said Larry again, “the Tuatha De—the Ancient Ones who had spells that could compel Mananan, who is the spirit of all the seas, an' Keithor, who is the god of all green living things, an' even Hesus, the unseen god, whose pulse is the pulse of all the firmament; yes, an' Orchil too, who sits within the earth an' weaves with the shuttle of mystery and her three looms of birth an' life an' death—even Orchil would weave as they commanded!”

He was silent—then:

“They are of them—the mighty ones—why else would I have bent my knee to them as I would have to the spirit of my mother? Why else would Lakla, whose gold-brown hair is the hair of Eilidh the Fair, whose mouth is the sweet mouth of Deirdre, an’ whose soul walked with mine ages ago among the fragrant green myrtle of Erin, serve them?” he whispered, eyes full of dream.

“Have you any idea how they got here?” I asked, not unreasonably.

“I haven’t thought about that,” he replied somewhat testily. “But at once, me excellent man o’ wisdom, a number occur to me. One of them is that this little party of three might have stopped here on their way to Ireland, an’ for good reasons of their own decided to stay a while; an’ another is that they might have come here afterward, havin’ got wind of what those rats out there were contemplatin’, and have stayed on the job till the time was ripe to save Ireland from ‘em; the rest of the world, too, of course,” he added magnanimously, “but Ireland in particular. And do any of those reasons appeal to ye?”

I shook my head.

“Well, what do you think?” he asked wearily.

“I think,” I said cautiously, “that we face an evolution of highly intelligent beings from ancestral sources radically removed from those through which mankind ascended. These half-human, highly developed batrachians they call the Akka prove that evolution in these caverned spaces has certainly pursued one different path than on earth. The Englishman, Wells, wrote an imaginative and very entertaining book concerning an invasion of earth by Martians, and he made his Martians enormously specialized cuttlefish. There was nothing inherently improbable in Wells’ choice. Man is the ruling animal of earth today solely by reason of a series of accidents; under another series spiders or ants, or even elephants, could have become the dominant race.

“I think,” I said, even more cautiously, “that the race to which the Three belong never appeared on earth’s surface; that their development took place here, unhindered through aeons. And if this be true, the structure of their brains, and therefore all their reactions, must be different from ours. Hence their knowledge and command of energies unfamiliar to us—and hence also the question whether they may not have an entirely different sense of values, of justice—and that is rather terrifying,” I concluded.

Larry shook his head.

“That last sort of knocks your argument, Doc,” he said. “They had sense of justice enough to help me out—and certainly they know love—for I saw the way they looked at Lakla; and sorrow—for there was no mistaking that in their faces.

“No,” he went on. “I hold to my own idea. They’re of the Old People. The little leprechaun knew his way here, an’ I’ll bet it was they who sent the word. An’ if the O’Keefe banshee comes here—which save the mark!—I’ll bet she’ll drop in on the Silent Ones for a social visit before

she an' her clan get busy. Well, it'll make her feel more at home, the good old body. No, Doc, no," he concluded, "I'm right; it all fits in too well to be wrong."

I made a last despairing attempt.

"Is there anything anywhere in Ireland that would indicate that the Tuatha De ever looked like the Three?" I asked—and again I had spoken most unfortunately.

"Is there?" he shouted. "Is there? By the kilt of Cormack MacCormack, I'm glad ye reminded me. It was worryin' me a little meself. There was Daghdha, who could put on the head of a great boar an' the body of a giant fish and cleave the waves an' tear to pieces the birlins of any who came against Erin; an' there was Rinn—"

How many more of the metamorphoses of the Old People I might have heard, I do not know, for the curtains parted and in walked Rador.

"You have rested well," he smiled, "I can see. The handmaiden bade me call you. You are to eat with her in her garden."

Down long corridors we trod and out upon a gardened terrace as beautiful as any of those of Yolara's city; bowered, blossoming, fragrant, set high upon the cliffs beside the domed castle. A table, as of milky jade, was spread at one corner, but the Golden Girl was not there. A little path ran on and up, hemmed in by the mass of verdure. I looked at it longingly; Rador saw the glance, interpreted it, and led me up the stepped sharp slope into a rock embrasure.

Here I was above the foliage, and everywhere the view was clear. Below me stretched the incredible bridge, with the frog people hurrying back and forth upon it. A pinnacle at my side hid the abyss. My eyes followed the cavern ledge. Above it the rock rose bare, but at the ends of the semi-circular strand a luxuriant vegetation began, stretching from the crimson shores back into far distances. Of browns and reds and yellows, like an autumn forest, was the foliage, with here and there patches of dark-green, as of conifers. Five miles or more, on each side, the forests swept, and then were lost to sight in the haze.

I turned and faced an immensity of crimson waters, unbroken, a true sea, if ever there was one. A breeze blew—the first real wind I had encountered in the hidden places; under it the surface, that had been as molten lacquer, rippled and dimpled. Little waves broke with a spray of rose-pearls and rubies. The giant Medusae drifted—stately, luminous kaleidoscopic elfin moons.

Far down, peeping around a jutting tower of the cliff, I saw dipping with the motion of the waves a floating garden. The flowers, too, were luminous—indeed sparkling—gleaming brilliants of scarlet and vermilions lighter than the flood on which they lay, mauves and odd shades of reddish-blue. They gleamed and shone like a little lake of jewels.

Rador broke in upon my musings.

"Lakla comes! Let us go down."

It was a shy Lakla who came slowly around the end of the path and, blushing furiously, held her hands out to Larry. And the Irishman took them, placed them over his heart, kissed them with a tenderness that had been lacking in the half-mocking, half-fierce caresses he had given the priestess. She blushed deeper, holding out the tapering fingers—then pressed them to her own heart.

“I like the touch of your lips, Larry,” she whispered. “They warm me here”—she pressed her heart again— “and they send little sparkles of light through me.” Her brows tilted perplexedly, accenting the nuance of diablerie, delicate and fascinating, that they cast upon the flower face.

“Do you?” whispered the O’Keefe fervently. “Do you, Lakla?” He bent toward her. She caught the amused glance of Rador; drew herself aside half-haughtily.

“Rador,” she said, “is it not time that you and the strong one, Olaf, were setting forth?”

“Truly it is, handmaiden,” he answered respectfully enough—yet with a current of laughter under his words. “But as you know the strong one, Olaf, wished to see his friends here before we were gone—and he comes even now,” he added, glancing down the pathway, along which came striding the Norseman.

As he faced us I saw that a transformation had been wrought in him. Gone was the pitiful seeking, and gone too the just as pitiful hope. The set face softened as he looked at the Golden Girl and bowed low to her. He thrust a hand to O’Keefe and to me.

“There is to be battle,” he said. “I go with Rador to call the armies of these frog people. As for me—Lakla has spoken. There is no hope for—for mine Helma in life, but there is hope that we destroy the Shining Devil and give mine Helma peace. And with that I am well content, ja! Well content!” He gripped our hands again. “We will fight!” he muttered. “Ja! And I will have vengeance!” The sternness returned; and with a salute Rador and he were gone.

Two great tears rolled from the golden eyes of Lakla.

“Not even the Silent Ones can heal those the Shining One has taken,” she said. “He asked me—and it was better that I tell him. It is part of the Three’s—punishment—but of that you will soon learn,” she went on hurriedly. “Ask me no questions now of the Silent Ones. I thought it better for Olaf to go with Rador, to busy himself, to give his mind other than sorrow upon which to feed.”

Up the path came five of the frog-women, bearing platters and ewers. Their bracelets and anklets of jewels were tinkling; their middles covered with short kirtles of woven cloth studded with the sparkling ornaments.

And here let me say that if I have given the impression that the Akka are simply magnified frogs, I regret it. Frog-like they are, and hence my phrase for them—but as unlike the frog, as we know it, as man is unlike the chimpanzee. Springing, I hazard, from the stegocephalia, the ancestor of

the frogs, these batrachians followed a different line of evolution and acquired the upright position just as man did his from the four-footed folk.

The great staring eyes, the shape of the muzzle were frog-like, but the highly developed brain had set upon the head and shape of it vital differences. The forehead, for instance, was not low, flat, and retreating—its frontal arch was well defined. The head was, in a sense, shapely, and with the females the great horny carapace that stood over it like a fantastic helmet was much modified, as were the spurs that were so formidable in the male; colouration was different also. The torso was upright; the legs a little bent, giving them their crouching gait—but I wander from my subject.¹

They set their burdens down. Larry looked at them with interest.

“You surely have those things well trained, Lakla,” he said.

“Things!” The handmaiden arose, eyes flashing with indignation. “You call my Akka things!”

“Well,” said Larry, a bit taken aback, “what do you call them?”

“My Akka are a people,” she retorted. “As much a people as your race or mine. They are good and loyal, and they have speech and arts, and they slay not, save for food or to protect themselves. And I think them beautiful, Larry, beautiful!” She stamped her foot. “And you call them—things!”

Beautiful! These? Yet, after all, they were, in their grotesque fashion. And to Lakla, surrounded by them, from babyhood, they were not strange, at all. Why shouldn't she think them beautiful? The same thought must have struck O'Keefe, for he flushed guiltily.

“I think them beautiful, too, Lakla,” he said remorsefully. “It's my not knowing your tongue too well that traps me. Truly, I think them beautiful—I'd tell them so, if I knew their talk.”

Lakla dimpled, laughed—spoke to the attendants in that strange speech that was unquestionably a language; they bridled, looked at O'Keefe with fantastic coquetry, cracked and boomed softly among themselves.

“They say they like you better than the men of Muria,” laughed Lakla.

“Did I ever think I'd be swapping compliments with lady frogs!” he murmured to me. “Buck up, Larry—keep your eyes on the captive Irish princess!” he muttered to himself.

¹ The Akka are viviparous. The female produces progeny at five-year intervals, never more than two at a time. They are monogamous, like certain of our own Ranidae. Pending my monograph upon what little I had time to learn of their interesting habits and customs, the curious will find instruction and entertainment in Brandes and Schvenichen's *Brutpflege der Schwanzlosen Batrachier*, p. 395; and Lilian V. Sampson's *Unusual Modes of Breeding among Anura*, *Amer. Nat.* xxxiv., 1900.—W. T. G.

“Rador goes to meet one of the ladala who is slipping through with news,” said the Golden Girl as we addressed ourselves to the food. “Then, with Nak, he and Olaf go to muster the Akka—for there will be battle, and we must prepare. Nak,” she added, “is he who went before me when you were dancing with Yolara, Larry.” She stole a swift, mischievous glance at him. “He is headman of all the Akka.”

“Just what forces can we muster against them when they come, darlin’?” said Larry.

“Darlin’?”—the Golden Girl had caught the caress of the word— “what’s that?”

“It’s a little word that means Lakla,” he answered. “It does—that is, when I say it; when you say it, then it means Larry.”

“I like that word,” mused Lakla.

“You can even say Larry darlin’!” suggested O’Keefe.

“Larry darlin’!” said Lakla. “When they come we shall have first of all my Akka—”

“Can they fight, mavourneen?” interrupted Larry.

“Can they fight! My Akka!” Again her eyes flashed. “They will fight to the last of them—with the spears that give the swift rotting, covered, as they are, with the jelly of those Saddu there—” She pointed through a rift in the foliage across which, on the surface of the sea, was floating one of the moon globes—and now I know why Rador had warned Larry against a plunge there. “With spears and clubs and with teeth and nails and spurs—they are a strong and brave people, Larry—darlin’, and though they hurl the Keth at them, it is slow to work upon them, and they slay even while they are passing into the nothingness!”

“And have we none of the Keth?” he asked.

“No”—she shook her head— “none of their weapons have we here, although it was—it was the Ancient Ones who shaped them.”

“But the Three are of the Ancient Ones?” I cried. “Surely they can tell—”

“No,” she said slowly. “No—there is something you must know—and soon; and then the Silent Ones say you will understand. You, especially, Goodwin, who worship wisdom.”

“Then,” said Larry, “we have the Akka; and we have the four men of us, and among us three guns and about a hundred cartridges—an’—an’ the power of the Three—but what about the Shining One, Fireworks—”

“I do not know.” Again the indecision that had been in her eyes when Yolara had launched her defiance crept back. “The Shining One is strong—and he has his—slaves!”

“Well, we’d better get busy good and quick!” the O’Keefe’s voice rang. But Lakla, for some reason of her own, would pursue the matter no further. The trouble fled from her eyes—they danced.

“Larry darlin’?” she murmured. “I like the touch of your lips—”

“You do?” he whispered, all thought flying of anything but the beautiful, provocative face so close to his. “Then, acushla, you’re goin’ to get acquainted with ‘em! Turn your head, Doc!” he said.

And I turned it. There was quite a long silence, broken by an interested, soft outburst of gentle boomings from the serving frog-maids. I stole a glance behind me. Lakla’s head lay on the Irishman’s shoulder, the golden eyes misty sunpools of love and adoration; and the O’Keefe, a new look of power and strength upon his clear-cut features, was gazing down into them with that look which rises only from the heart touched for the first time with that true, all-powerful love, which is the pulse of the universe itself, the real music of the spheres of which Plato dreamed, the love that is stronger than death itself, immortal as the high gods and the true soul of all that mystery we call life.

Then Lakla raised her hands, pressed down Larry’s head, kissed him between the eyes, drew herself with a trembling little laugh from his embrace.

“The future Mrs. Larry O’Keefe, Goodwin,” said Larry to me a little unsteadily.

I took their hands—and Lakla kissed me!

She turned to the booming—smiling—frog-maids; gave them some command, for they filed away down the path. Suddenly I felt, well, a little superfluous.

“If you don’t mind,” I said, “I think I’ll go up the path there again and look about.”

But they were so engrossed with each other that they did not even hear me—so I walked away, up to the embrasure where Rador had taken me. The movement of the batrachians over the bridge had ceased. Dimly at the far end I could see the cluster of the garrison. My thoughts flew back to Lakla and to Larry.

What was to be the end?

If we won, if we were able to pass from this place, could she live in our world? A product of these caverns with their atmosphere and light that seemed in some subtle way to be both food and drink—how would she react to the unfamiliar foods and air and light of outer earth? Further, here so far as I was able to discover, there were no malignant bacilli—what immunity could Lakla have then to those microscopic evils without, which only long ages of sickness and death have bought for us a modicum of protection? I began to be oppressed. Surely they had been long enough by themselves. I went down the path.

I heard Larry.

“It’s a green land, mavourneen. And the sea rocks and dimples around it—blue as the heavens, green as the isle itself, and foam horses toss their white manes, and the great clean winds blow over it, and the sun shines down on it like your eyes, acushla—”

“And are you a king of Ireland, Larry darlin’?” Thus Lakla—

But enough!

At last we turned to go—and around the corner of the path I caught another glimpse of what I have called the lake of jewels. I pointed to it.

“Those are lovely flowers, Lakla,” I said. “I have never seen anything like them in the place from whence we come.”

She followed my pointing finger—laughed.

“Come,” she said, “let me show you them.”

She ran down an intersecting way, we following; came out of it upon a little ledge close to the brink, three feet or more I suppose about it. The Golden Girl’s voice rang out in a high-pitched, tremulous, throbbing call.

The lake of jewels stirred as though a breeze had passed over it; stirred, shook, and then began to move swiftly, a shimmering torrent of shining flowers down upon us! She called again, the movement became more rapid; the gem blooms streamed closer—closer, wavering, shifting, winding—at our very feet. Above them hovered a little radiant mist. The Golden Girl leaned over; called softly, and up from the sparkling mass shot a green vine whose heads were five flowers of flaming ruby—shot up, flew into her hand and coiled about the white arm, its quintette of lambent blossoms—regarding us!

It was the thing Lakla had called the Yekta; that with which she had threatened the priestess; the thing that carried the dreadful death—and the Golden Girl was handling it like a rose!

Larry swore—I looked at the thing more closely. It was a hydroid, a development of that strange animal-vegetable that, sometimes almost microscopic, waves in the sea depths like a cluster of flowers paralyzing its prey with the mysterious force that dwells in its blossom heads!²

² The Yekta of the Crimson Sea are as extraordinary developments of hydroid forms as the giant Medusae, of which, of course, they are not too remote cousins. The closest resemblances to them in outer water forms are among the Gymnoblasic Hydroids, notably *Clavetella prolifera*, a most interesting ambulatory form of six tentacles. Almost every bather in Southern waters, Northern too, knows the pain that contact with certain “jelly fish” produces. The Yekta’s development was prodigious and, to us, monstrous. It secretes in its five heads an almost incredibly swiftly acting poison which I suspect, for I had no chance to verify the theory, destroys the entire nervous system to the accompaniment of truly infernal agony; carrying at the same time the illusion that the torment stretches through infinities of time. Both ether and nitrous oxide gas produce in the majority this

“Put it down, Lakla,” the distress in O’Keefe’s voice was deep. Lakla laughed mischievously, caught the real fear for her in his eyes; opened her hand, gave another faint call—and back it flew to its fellows.

“Why, it wouldn’t hurt me, Larry!” she expostulated. “They know me!”

“Put it down!” he repeated hoarsely.

She sighed, gave another sweet, prolonged call. The lake of gems—rubies and amethysts, mauves and scarlet-tinged blues—wavered and shook even as it had before—and swept swiftly back to that place whence she had drawn them!

Then, with Larry and Lakla walking ahead, white arm about his brown neck; the O’Keefe still expostulating, the handmaiden laughing merrily, we passed through her bower to the domed castle.

Glancing through a cleft I caught sight again of the far end of the bridge; noted among the clustered figures of its garrison of the frog-men a movement, a flashing of green fire like marshlights on spear tips; wondered idly what it was, and then, other thoughts crowding in, followed along, head bent, behind the pair who had found in what was Olaf’s hell, their true paradise.

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

[Return to Contents](#)

sensation of time extension, without of course the pain symptom. What Lakla called the Yekta kiss is I imagine about as close to the orthodox idea of Hell as can be conceived. The secret of her control over them I had no opportunity of learning in the rush of events that followed. Knowledge of the appalling effects of their touch came, she told me, from those few “who had been kissed so lightly” that they recovered. Certainly nothing, not even the Shining One, was dreaded by the Murians as these were—W. T. G.