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Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 11, ISSUE 22
30TH JULY 2017

**HELPING THE
BLIND TO SEE**

BY PAUL
LUBACZEWSKI—
HELL ON
EARTH...

**THE WHISTLING
SAVIOUR**

BY GARY MURPHY
—I JUST WANTED
A WINNER...

**THE PACT
BY STEVEN
HAVELOCK**

**WANDERING
MONSTERS
BY GAVIN CHAPPELL**

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Gavin Chappell

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Steven Havelock, Gregory KH Bryant, Johann August Apel, Jules Verne, H Rider Haggard*

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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[EDITORIAL](#)

[HELPING THE BLIND TO SEE](#) by Paul Lubaczewski—*Hell on earth...* HORROR

[THE WHISTLING SAVIOUR](#) by Gary Murphy—*I just wanted a winner...* HORROR

[THE PACT](#) by Steven Havelock— *“The grave of Kasim Mahmood.”* HORROR

[WANDERING MONSTERS](#) by Gavin Chappell—*Lost in the woods...* SWORD AND SORCERY

[THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO](#) Episode Seventeen by Gregory KH Bryant—*Scroungers were attacking the bases on Europa and Ganymede...* SCIENCE FICTION

[TALES OF THE DEAD](#) by Johann August Apel—*The Death Bride: Part Two of Two...* GOTHIC HORROR

[THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND](#) Part Three: Chapter Three by Jules Verne—*The eys of the pirates...* SCIENCE FICTION CLASSIC

[THE WANDERER'S NECKLACE](#) Book Two: Chapter Six by H Rider Haggard—*Victory or Valhalla!* CLASSIC VIKING FANTASY

[ROGUE PLANET PRESS SUBMISSIONS CALL](#)

EDITORIAL

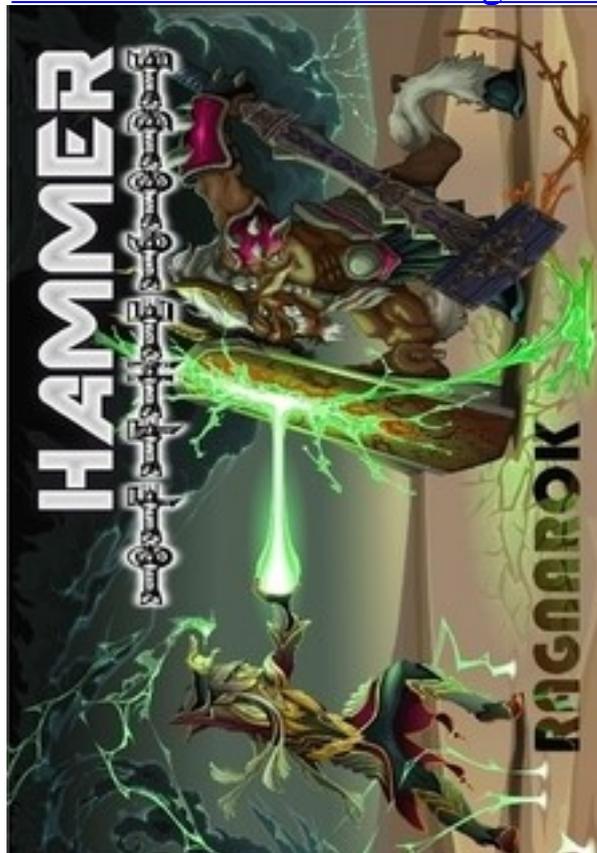
This week, it's devils and pirates galore: a lawyer gets tied up in his work, a gambler struggles to deal with his addiction, a criminal searches for a grave, and four young adventurers encounter an evil wizard.

In *The Battle for Callisto*, Colonel Bridgmont has his hands full. The tale of *The Death Bride* concludes. The settlers on Lincoln Island fight the pirates. And Olaf goes to war.

—Gavin Chappell

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[Return to Contents](#)

HELPING THE BLIND TO SEE by Paul Lubaczewski

Richmond Anderson Czewieski was in many ways a giant of a man. Not in stature, no, he was slightly tall, but very lean. He was that kind of genius that strikes the earth sometimes like lightning, a jack of all trades who manages to master most of them. His passion in life consisted of trying everything, getting exactly good enough to finally be noticed by others for it just by sheer dint of the material he produced, and then to find a new challenge to engage his interests. In his sixty years on the planet, he always found a new thing, more interesting to him than the last.

This is not to say he was especially brave in his questing for new thrills. When he was younger he had achieved physical feats to be sure, but he would have been the first to say, he had been fighting his fears as much as anything else on those days. Once the fear was sufficiently subdued, his interest in the activity waned, and another challenge was sought. As he got older, as many older people do, he developed minor panic attacks. Since they were mostly about silly and trivial things, he found he could just as easily overcome them with some effort. Some things terrified him utterly of course so that he went out of his way to avoid situations like that. If the fear was insurmountable, why even start the climb?

He studied constantly; history, literature, political theory, geology, medicine, theology, even the “dark arts” for a few years as an extended curiosity that had flowed from theology. He had been led there by years of studying comparative religion. His reasoning there was simple enough, “It’s a religion to someone, after all. Might as well compare it.” The old man had published some very authoritative papers on the subject, and then, just like everything else in his life, had seemed to lose interest in it.

His latest interest and the one he would be known for would be in mechanical engineering. It had led him to create in his workshop a prototype for a more balanced and more responsive version of personal transport than had ever been seen. It went faster, it responded faster, and it was almost impossible to fall off of. It was environmentally friendly, and human-friendly to ride.

Unfortunately, someone had taken one of these machines and souped it up considerably. Richmond had no idea how they managed to do it. He thought he had fool-proofed it, and then humanity had found a bigger fool. Then, at impossibly breakneck speeds, they had taken one of his machines, bought at a local toy store originally, and managed to cause a five-car pileup.

The one thing Richmond had never taken any interest in was liability law, he was terrified of it.

Gods, what a crappy day. Andy had had worse, but not recently. It didn’t matter, long term, everything could be gotten through, and now he was home. He turned off his phone the second he came through the door, and threw it on the couch, almost accusingly. The action of someone who believed in his heart that the phone had conspired against him today, on purpose, and with menace, who was now ridding himself of its odious and traitorous presence. This is also a common practice towards tires who have the misfortune of being driven over nails on a rainy day.

Andy wandered into the kitchen with one thing in mind. As the refrigerator door swung open, there it was, the reason to exist after a day like today, cold beer. On second glance after he had the can open, leftover pizza too; things were looking up. It had been the kind of day, where avoiding cooking, and dishes, but running right into a mild beer buzz appeared to be a major accomplishment on par with getting all those elephants over the damned mountains.

He might not even need the lights on in the house tonight, Andy could illuminate it from the flaming wreckage of his current case. This had not been a good case when he took it, but legal ambulance pursuits paid for this place and his former house that was being enjoyed by his ex-wife. This case was now a burning structure he'd have to rush into, to see if he could save the old lady's cat, whose name was "Out of Court Settlement".

As of noon, he was no longer suing a wacky old guy whose insurance would probably pay out just to make him go away so the parent company could go back to making billions. No, now he was suing an estate. A gaggle of grieving relatives packing up a courtroom did not help anything, especially if you already had a shaky case, to begin with. ESPECIALLY when the various driver's insurances had already paid out actual hospital costs, and you were in search of the nebulous and elusive beast, "pain and suffering".

He was torn, between asking the judge for an outright dismissal, and continuing. Andy really couldn't see him winning it. In the strictest sense of reality, the old duffer hadn't even been liable, so that was a problem, but a hurdle that had never made him balk before. The longer this continued, the more legal costs his estate would wrack up, leaving his little lawyerly butt open to counter suit for expenses. But, on the other hand, he didn't want to pay ANY legal expenses that they had ALREADY created, and at this point, winning was his only way out. Things were not helped by the drunken rant Andy had gone on about "large corporations making unsafe things, and screw the little guy". This, to a reporter at the bar near the courthouse, who HAD SWORN this was off the record but had been recording it anyway.

Andy had checked for next of kin, that meant the daughter. Divorced, kid in school, hopefully as sappy as the old man himself. He'd make an appointment, try and browbeat her a bit, get a check. Do the old "juries are unpredictable" routine, and layer it with, "really I'm trying to make this go away for everybody". But gods, this was a setback, because if this train wreck actually got to trial, his goose was probably cooked. Even if the existence of the firm entailed listening for sirens with one hand on your briefcase, getting taken to the cleaners on this, the other partners would not be amused.

That, was tomorrow's problem, tonight, belonged to crappy TV, beer, with a bourbon chaser, and pizza. Then sleep, hopefully in his bed, but the couch was comfortable enough if he never made it up the stairs, he'd bought it for just that sort of eventuality.

His bladder woke him up some hours later. Christ, he fell asleep on the couch, why in the hell didn't he just drink beer upstairs? It wasn't like Claudia was going to complain, or even come over here anytime soon, his weekend with Tom had just happened. Begrudgingly Andy convinced himself to get up and go upstairs. If for no other reason, then that's where he kept his toilet, and Andy needed it now.

He didn't bother to flip the light switch when he got upstairs, it was a full moon, and enough light was getting into the condo for him to see what he needed to see. God that felt good, it

was almost worth getting up for. Andy was on target, and the wall was getting boring, so he turned to get a nicer view of the dogwood flowers in bloom in the back yard. It looked like something was in the tree, though, and that was weird. He could almost make it out....

A moment later Andy was at the window, unconcerned with the mess he had made to get there from the toilet.

Peering out through the window now close up, it wasn't there. Nothing was there but a dogwood tree in bloom.

A dogwood, that he would have sworn a second ago, had also contained a hanging body.

This was not the mindset Andy really wanted to go into this meeting with. He was slightly hungover, for one. Being a second behind the beat on everything was not going to help him with his "condescending, but kind, and looking out for you really," lawyer routine. For whatever reason, the trick of the light had freaked him out something evil as well. Andy had been planning to just take a whiz and stumble off to bed, maybe even managing to remove his clothes and pull back the covers first. After that little incident, though, it had taken him a half an hour of blearily trying to read some bestseller he was only even bothering with so he could say he read it before he was ready to finally kill his lamp and sleep.

The daughter. Marianne Anastasia Czewieski-Fuller. More importantly Professor Czewieski-Fuller. His only saving grace was that she taught political science, and not law or business. The fact that she taught it at an Ivy League school dulled that grace considerably. Forty-two, divorced, but maintaining her hyphenation, one son aged eleven, and judging from the syllabus from her course, utterly and humourless.

He had a horrible suspicion she was the type of woman who could tell you she was going to cut your balls off whispering in your ear, then turn to the crowd and cry tears of despair in the next breath. The type who could stand there delivering a convincing sermon to the world about what a meanie you were with her hand clutching your scrotum. She was an only child, daddies little princess, they could be like that. She had refused to talk to him personally, Andy had been forced to make an appointment with her assistant to meet at her office.

These are the type of things you learn to recognize as not boding well.

So here Andy was, in a waiting room on her campus, feeling even worse now than when he had called to confirm. This was way too reminiscent of his own time in school. Waiting for his Professor to inform him at length what he thought of Andy's most recent closing argument exercise, and praying to god that the Prof hadn't noticed how much of it Andy had plagiarized from the dustiest tomes in the law library.

The chair he was sitting in was leather, but the type of cheap leather that said, "petitioner awaiting an audience", banks buy a lot of them. Andy was sweating slightly, the heat wasn't too high, so this was a symptom of bourbon and poor life planning skills. It made him worry for the persistence of the aftershave and deodorant he had on, in the face of the buzz-saw assault of booze BO. He was beginning to debate with himself about how much ibuprofen would help him now when the buzzer rang on the assistant's phone. She talked in a hushed tone into it for a moment and then hung it up.

“Professor Czewieski-Fuller will see you now, you can go on in,” this counting as the most words the woman had said to him since he had gotten there.

“Thank you,” he said, not meaning it, and went through the door.

Andy stepped into the well-lit room and his inner sophomore groaned. Large old wood desk, bookshelves laden with books he suspected were actually read instead of being decorative like his own office, and three large chairs for guests. Her chair was old, but looked comfortable enough. The one he was expected to occupy, proved that people back in the 1930s had a severely distorted view of what was comfortable. Important people the world over have these chairs, padding that suggests comfort, but a shape that managed to be uncomfortable no matter which casual position you tried to contort into. Andy suspected that these belonged to a plot to ensure you didn't waste too much of the important person's time, he'd had something similar installed in his own office the day he got it. It had taken weeks to find them in an antique store, but they were worth every penny. In short, this was an office, where students had to come, to be reminded that in the eye of their professor, at this moment, they were lower than a bug to be trod upon.

“Hello, Mister Asher,” said the woman sitting behind the desk without looking up. She was exactly what he expected, unfortunately. Severe, brunette, thin and sharp in the face, pale, and with a few grey hairs showing tied into the iron hard bun on the back of her head.

Temporarily taken aback, and already off rhythm, Andy clumsily offered his own hand, “Hello, Mrs. ummm... Czewieski.” He hoped he hadn't mangled the pronunciation too badly.

She looked at his hand, briefly staring at it like he had proffered a trout who had deceased days before, but finally took it daintily and shook it once. “Please, take a seat,” she nodded to indicate one of the antiquated lime green leather torture devices.

The Professor steepled her fingers on her desk and stared at him for a long, uncomfortable moment over them, then finally she said, “I can only assume you're here to talk settlement today.”

These were the magic words that turned Andy's brain back on, “Well, that's a little more forward than I would have put it of course, but that's the gist-...”

She cut him off abruptly. “So, exactly how much are you offering us?”

“Excuse me?” asked Andy dumbfounded by what he had just heard, “I'm not sure you understand the situation here.”

“No,” Marianne sighed, leaning back in her deep leather chair, “No, I don't think you do Mister Asher. Your absolutely frivolous lawsuit succeeded in killing my father, Mister Asher.”

Andy rallied as best he could, “Well, it would be hard to prove, in the case of something like heart failure that the stress...”

She cut him off again, “But a suicide, on the other hand, with a note, in his handwriting. Especially when the lawsuit is specifically mentioned. I, unfortunately, have all that. My father was a brilliant, brilliant man, but unfortunately had a very poor upbringing. Children in these situations grow up often enough, to be old men terrified of two things, people stealing from them, and mindless overbearing authority attacking them unfairly. Your little lawsuit provided my father with both of those wrapped up in a bow. “

“It was never our intent...”

“No, no I’m sure it wasn’t. I’ve seen your commercials. You, sir, are the type of lawyer that insurance underwriters wish they could march off to the showers. I’ve taken a number of liability law courses in my life, just because you have a degree is no reason not to better yourself, and I tried to convince my father that this was the definition of a frivolous suit. Alas, he would nod his head, agree, and then go right back to panicking. He had stopped eating, he wasn’t sleeping, and finally thinking he was doing me a favour, and thinking the suit would die with him, he killed himself.” She said all of this with an icy calm, and with a firm voice, that was, if anything, more frightening to Andy because of all the venom and anger it didn’t contain.

She gave him a second to digest all of that and then continued, “My father studied, many and diverse things in his life, often just to know it. Law was not among them. But let me blunt with you, I haven’t filed my response yet, but as of this moment, I expect I will be counter suing for a large amount of money. From here on out, your firm and my lawyer will communicate, as I do not want to lay eyes on you again. You saw yourself in, please Mister Asher, proceed to reverse the process.”

There was enough finality to all that Andy couldn’t even find an angle or wedge to debate it with, so he got to his feet. “Well, then, I’m sorry to have wasted your time.”

“As am I, Mister Asher. Goodbye,” she said without looking at him, already studying a paper on her desk.

Andy turned to leave. Suddenly the air around him filled with a scent. Revoltingly sweet, yet acrid, it overpowered his sense leaving his stomach churning. He had paused in his step to deal with this when he felt, hands on his shoulders near his throat. He turned to face the attacker assuming the Professor had lost her iron self-control to attack him.

She was sitting at her desk, still reading.

Catching the movement, she looked up at him, “I’m sorry, was there something else?”

The smell had vanished as quickly as it had appeared, Andy stared at her for a second incredulously. “No, no I suppose there isn’t,” he said, and then completed his journey out the door.

Andy was on his cell phone before the door to the building had even finished shutting, he needed to talk to his aide as of right now. He got the machine, a quick look at his watch informed him of why, it was lunch, the little SOB was at Subway, probably hitting on the cute girl who worked the lunch rush. “Bill, it’s Andy, we got issues. I’m working the

Czewieski case. We need an exit strategy. The old weirdo didn't just die, he offed himself, and the family is already threatening a counter. Frankly, they got a better case than we do. I need you to find every single thing you can on the guy and email it to my home address ASAP. I gotta Hail-Mary this thing if we have a hope in hell of not losing money on this, so anything we can find on the guy might be our saving grace. Hurry on this, bye."

He was getting lunch, and going home. If Andy didn't want to have to explain to the other partners how he lost a small fortune on "pain and suffering" here, he had some work to do, and he worked better from home.

When Andy got home, he fired up the desktop, this was not a job for Wi-Fi and a laptop. Anything of any interest, he wanted it on the largest screen possible, and frankly the cable was faster. This had all the earmarks of an all-nighter. When he looked, Andy saw a message waiting for him from the office. He sat down with a beer and scanned what Bill had sent him.

He might have underestimated things when he only left a night. The late Richmond was involved in EVERYTHING it seemed. The amount of published papers and material was staggering. His bibliography read like five people's; it had papers on geography, politics, literature, mechanical engineering, robotics, and geology. The old man had even covered the arts in his life; music appreciation, philosophy, and religion. Even religion could be sub-sectioned down from there; Buddhism, Christianity: there were even five different papers published on black magic and Satanism.

Alright, time to regroup, and at least pick a section he wanted to go over. Clearly, Andy was looking for a needle in a haystack, so he had to shrink the size of the stack. Black magic, though? Who in the hell publishes articles on black magic and freaking engineering? This was not a normal human being long before Andy ever started putting together this suit. Andy might be willing to concede that the lawsuit might have sent the old man over the edge, but he was dancing there before Andy even saw his name.

Engineering and robotics then, if there was anything, it would have to be in there. Andy grabbed another beer to still his aching hangover and sat down for what promised to be hell on earth. He didn't know what he was looking for, and he wasn't sure where he'd find it. Andy was just hoping he'd find it in a hurry.

By the next morning when he woke up on the couch, he'd managed not to find it. Simple as that. Andy just didn't understand what he was looking at enough. It hadn't helped matters that his mind kept wandering to the articles the guy had written about Satanism and black magic. Who knew, maybe he could use that as a last line of defence, character defamation was not below him, certainly if NOT doing it was about to cost a wad of cash. There were still some angles to play here. He'd call Bill, have him arrange a way to get a tour of the duffer's factory anonymously, maybe there was something there. Andy called him on his cell.

When he picked up, Andy talked fast, "Bill, look, I need you to get me a tour of their factory....no I need it to be anonymous, feed 'em some bullshit about me being an interested investor or some such crap... Look, legally they may have to let me in, but it will all be cleaned up if they know I'm the guy currently suing the founder. Right... Right...no, whenever just set it up. Alright, thanks, bye."

Two hours later, he found himself in an industrial park, squinting at street numbers. Andy knew that the whole company had been bought out by a conglomerate, but most of the early transports had actually been built right here in the good ol' USA. It'd be the type of thing that would bring a tear to your eye in a fit of patriotism if circumstances were different of course, and he wasn't trying to leach a huge settlement off of them. Lawsuits, they were the hidden cost of progress, and Andy was nothing but progress's humble servant.

Eventually, Andy found the place in the back, bordered by a farmer's field. A large, painted sign stuck on the side of the sheet metal building proclaimed it to be the home of "Hoverlyte!". The company had only been in business for five years and had just been bought out by some major league toy manufacturer for an ungodly amount of money. Despite that, the paint was peeling off the wooden sign.

He was legitimately surprised the "interested investor" routine had even flown considering the sale. It had been explained to him by Bill, though, that the old nut had swung a deal that kept his original employees on and gave them access to the labs to develop their own ideas, which they maintained ownership over. That must have been a major sticking point. Andy wouldn't doubt, that already the new owners were finding a loophole that would turn Richmond's demise into a nullification of that. So, this building was probably chock full of nascent industrial geniuses in need of some start-up funding to break out on their own. Or it was a nuthouse when dealing with genius, that could be a pretty fine line.

Andy whipped on his cheerful, friendly face and walked in. There was a receptionist which was promising, he had worried that it would be a little looser than that, considering that a bunch of creative minds had been handed a factory to play in. Handing the monkeys the keys to the banana plantation has a way of going south very quickly.

"May I help you?" the youngish blond at the desk asked, politely if not enthusiastically.

"Hi! Andrew Willingham, I have a two o'clock appointment," he said with his best 'I'm your pal' face plastered on. He always found it best to use his real first name in these situations if he could, it made sure he was more likely to answer when spoken to.

"I'll ring back, it might take a moment if they're in the middle of something. We have coffee if you wouldn't mind waiting," she said with a smile that could only be called long-suffering.

Andy gathered she was as much their minder as their receptionist, every really intelligent person he'd even met in his life, had one. Someone to tell them when they had an appointment, where they put their glasses, that eating, on regular intervals was important, that sort of thing. He knew the factory had real employees just building the things, but control still seemed to be in the hands of Richmond's associates.

Roughly fifteen minutes later a door opened behind the reception desk. Out stepped a burly man about fifty, and decidedly distracted looking. His manner of carrying himself was at direct odds with his size and build. He was built like a retired boxer, but his face looked like he was desperately trying to remember where he had set his calculator.

“Sorry, Mister Willingham. Things are a bit hectic in development these days, I’m sure you understand,” the man said, thrusting out his hand in an awkward jerking motion like he had to be trained to do it.

“And you are?” Andy asked, taking his hand with a gentle smile.

“Oh, sorry again, Bill Trumbauer,” he said pumping Andy’s hand, “Like I said, it’s a bit hectic.”

“Well, no worries, I’m just here as a grunt myself of course,” Andy said with a smile. “I’m just here to see the wonderful work you’ve been up to and report back to the other investors. If everything else is as impressive as the rumours we’ve been hearing, I’m sure I’ll just omit this part.”

The man gave him a grateful smile at that, “Well, right this way, I’ll give you the tour.”

As Andy had been hoping, Bill led him right to the factory floor. “I’m surprised they still have you making so many,” he shouted over the assembly line.

Bill leaned in close so he didn’t need to shout so much and said loudly, “They get a tax break if a certain percentage are made in the states. They don’t have to build ‘em all here, or we’d be closed already, but we can crank out just enough.”

Andy nodded sagely and turned his attention to the assembly line. He was looking desperately for one thing, anything, that might look off, or out of the ordinary, or dangerous. He knew he had already trespassed into shaky areas already just setting up this trip, but dammit, the daughter had rattled him yesterday. He was bound and determined now, to avoid telling the partners that they should punt this one as far away from the firm as possible. Bending a rule here or there, ignoring human decency, whatever, this was his final shot at rescuing this case. Proving liability was always shaky, and he’d had three different experts tell him personally that the design was genius, all he had left was something wrong at the factory.

He was only half listening as Bill described the process, and talked up what a genius Mister Czewieski had been. It wasn’t like he was expecting Bill to suddenly say, “And we keep our most negligent employees at this station that handles an amazingly vital safety feature.” It would be great if he did, but he was old enough to not expect it.

Andy was staring at the factory line as they went past the stations, when, there it was again. The stench he had smelled in the daughter’s office was everywhere again. His stomach turned and churned as it wafted all around him. He glanced over at Bill, but the man seemed completely unaware of anything out of the ordinary. Andy’s eyes were darting everywhere looking for some source of the smell, but seeing nothing.

“You’re going to be dead soon, Andrew Asher,” a voice hissed in his ear.

“What did you say?” Andy turned and demanded of Bill.

“Excuse me?” Bill said, turning to look concerned at him, his eyes wide at Andy’s outburst.

Just as suddenly as it had appeared, the smell vanished, “Ummm...uh, nothing, nothing, sorry. It must be all the noise.”

“Say, fella, you don’t look so good. Are you OK?” Bill asked, his voice sounding very sincere.

“Sorry, sorry, must have been something I ate,” Andy said, as loud as he could with his stomach still churning.

“Well, Mister Willingham, if you’re feeling under the weather, we could always reschedule to do this another time,” replied Bill.

“You know, maybe, maybe that might be for the best,” Andy gasped out gratefully.

Once again, he went straight home. He had no idea what was going on, but he knew one thing, he knew he wanted out of this litigation. It was a loser case, he had been willing to take on as a wild swing, hoping for an easy settlement, not this constant twisting away from the way it had gone. Clearly talking to the daughter had gotten in his head somehow, but there were other lawyers at the firm. If the partners wanted to push it, let one of them deal with it, he was out of this.

His goals for tonight were as simple as simple could be. Beer, X-box One, simple. He had some leftover Chinese that hadn’t gone south yet or some frozen meals that might as well be called “Lonely Loser Man” instead of what they said on the box. Normally he liked playing horror games, but he suspected that playing all the damned horror games was part of what was setting his imagination off in the first place. Tonight was a night that called for football set on rookie; he needed an easy win in his life at the moment.

Andy was walking past the courthouse on his way to the office the next day, to break the news that this one had gone terminal. Technically they had reserved parking, but in reality, they had a trespasser already parked there. No point in even calling it in, before they would be able to find a tow truck who was willing to risk the liability to tow it out of his spot, half the day would be gone.

His path took him past the county courthouse, all Gothic and majestic. It must have been his mood, he normally found it unique and beautiful, today it just looked foreboding. Out front, though was something different today. A group of men was working on the hoisting of an enormous American flag. The thing was ridiculously huge, they weren’t even attempting to keep it from the ground. Two men were hoisting on the rope to raise it, and most of it was still touching the ground.

This, looked to be as good a distraction as any from his problems, so Andy walked over to where the men had paused in their task, “Where in the hell did this come from?”

“You work in the courthouse?” asked the one man who was doing most of the hoisting.

“Yeah, umm sorta, I’m a lawyer,” Andy replied, staring at the enormous thing just beginning to dangle from the ground.

“It’s a flag,” the man said, hoisting again.

“Yeah, I, uh... gathered that. It’s kinda big, isn’t it?”

“A bit, yeah.”

Andy considered this and walked a few steps near where the other man was coiling the rope behind him as they heaved the gargantuan flag upwards. “So, happy in your work?” he asked nonchalantly.

“Could be worse,” the other man replied.

“So why, the what? gotta be seventy-five by hundred and fifty-foot flag? I mean the pole was ridiculous when they put it up, but, does the flag have to be too?”

“Local millionaire got patriotic on us,” the man grunted.

“Ted, pay attention, will ya?” the man up front grunted.

“So, how much a thing like that weigh?” Andy asked, enjoying the ridiculous distraction the morning was providing him.

The man in the rear was still only half paying attention to his job, happy for the distraction himself, “A few hundred pounds between the flag, and the ropes and stuff.”

“Wonder what could get a guy feeling that patriotic?” Andy mused half to himself.

“Town Bicentennial’s coming up, his family goes way back, so he’s making a fuss,” the man who was willing to talk said from his coiling post.

“Huh!” said Andy, and he meant it.

By this point, a crowd was beginning to gather around the flag pole. “Ladies and gents, please step back, if we lose our grip on this thing somebody could get hurt!” the man doing the hoisting said loudly. For whatever reason, this directive seemed to ignore Andy, who by dint of getting there before anyone else, had now become an honorary member of the crew.

Which probably explained what the large guy doing the hauling said next, “Hey buddy, I’m having a hard time here, and I hate to pull Jimmy off of coiling. If you’re gonna stand there like that, you mind giving me a hand?”

“Huh?” Andy responded shaken out of his reverie of watching other people work. “Yeah, sure, just give me a sec.” With that, he shrugged off his jacket and placed it carefully on the lawn, then, he just as fastidiously un-cuffed his shirt sleeves and rolled them up past his elbow.

It took a minute, but Andy had soon hunkered in behind the first man, whose name he discovered was Larry. With the extra helper things soon progressed, but it was taking all of their strength. Between the flag, the ropes, and the weights on the flag to keep it from wrapping around the pole, the heft was just as impressive as its size.

Nobody ever agreed entirely on what happened next.

Larry's hands slipped on the rope as he was reaching out to pull in another length, and the man named Ted must not have been paying very close attention with the extra man in front of him. The rope lunged forward, and somehow the rope wrapped around Andy. This was the part no-one could agree on.

He was jerked violently forward; the force was violent enough that it knocked Larry to the ground face first. The weight of the falling flag on the other side hurtled him upward until finally, the flag hit the ground. He arced up even further, and then fell just as violently down, his flight ending in a sickening crack.

People covered children's eyes. Others turned away, as the remains of Andy Asher Esquire, slowly slid down the coil of rope that had wrapped itself around his neck. Nobody moved to get him down right away, the angle his head was tilted now suggested that the only thing left to do for him was to close his eyes.

The official story was it was just an accident, that he had gotten tangled in the rope. A few people swore that he must have coiled it around himself to keep a better grip. A child, whose mother told him to hush, and stop telling such tales, swore that the rope had moved on its own.

Everybody was happy with the original story, and nobody wanted to talk much about what they had seen that day. Not surprisingly, though, the flag was hoisted by a slightly larger crew the next day, because the millionaire who had paid for it said, "I spent ninety grand on that flag! You think I give a good god damn if it's killed a lawyer? That's only a good start in my eyes!"

There was eventually a rather large pay-out to the widow and only child of Andy Asher.

Professor Marianne Czewieski-Fuller was reading the newspaper at her desk. She was also smiling happily. She pulled out her cell phone, and pressed a button, waiting while it rang. "Hello Terry, Marianne. Could you be a dear and do me a favour? I'm relatively certain someone has accessed the database of my father's works online recently. Could you tell me what their address is, and which articles they opened, please? You can? That's so wonderful of you, Terry. No, no, just email it to me, I'll keep my inbox open and just wait for it to pop up. About ten minutes? You're such a dear. Thank you, bye bye."

Marianne happily went back to reading her paper, she had become so engrossed in it that she had pushed back her looming chair and had her feet up on the desk. The stillness was broken eventually from a ping from her computer's speaker. She swung her feet down and brought herself back up to her desk so she could check her message.

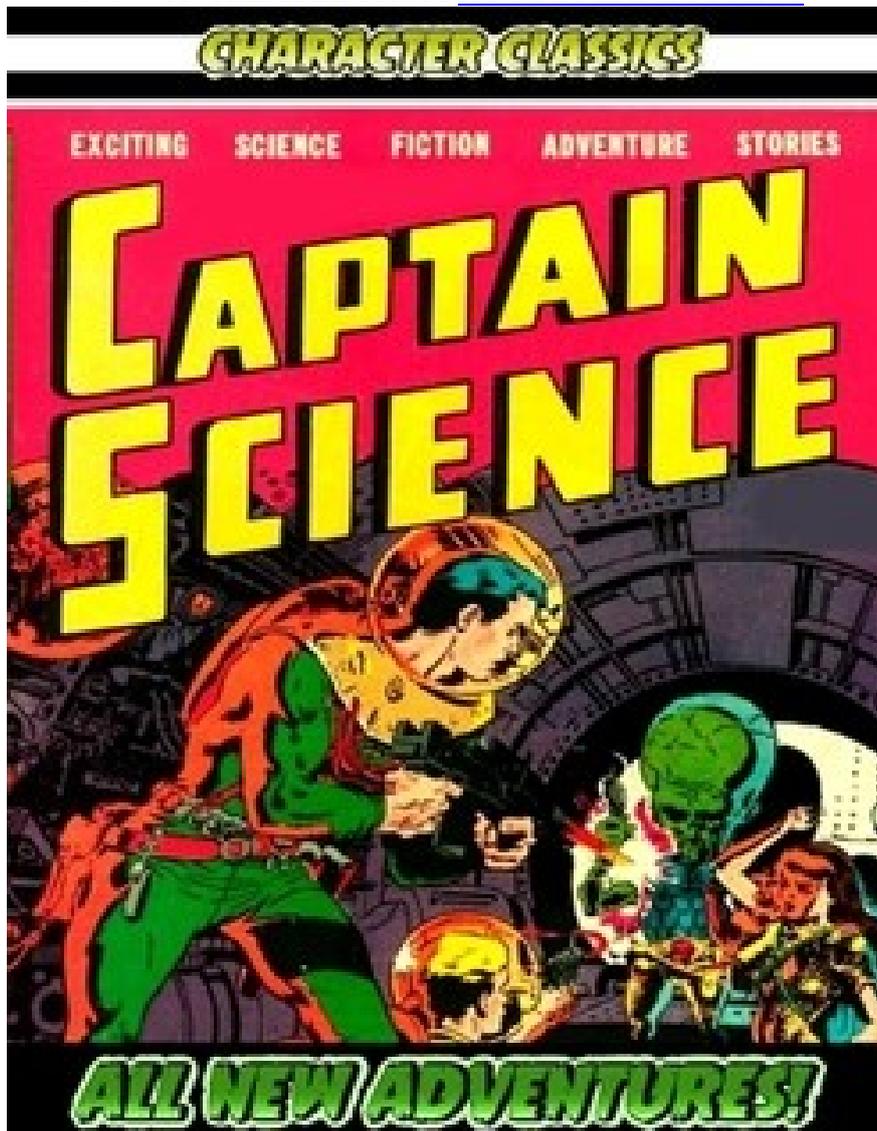
It was the email she was waiting for. She scanned it for a little while and then leaned back in her chair. Her face had broken out in a wide smile. Finally, she said to the air in the empty room, "Oh, Mister Asher, if only you had shown a bit more interest in all of my father's works. If you had opened the ones on magic, for instance, you might still be alive."

She pressed a button on the intercom on her desk and waited. A moment later the voice of her assistant came through, “Yes, Professor?”

“Melissa, be a dear and call my lawyer and tell him to drop Mister Asher’s name from the counter-suit, please. After all, I’m not the type of monster who sues a widow and orphans.”

THE END

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[Return to Contents](#)

THE WHISTLING SAVIOUR by Gary Murphy

It had come to a head. The gambling, it was true to say, had become a battle; the fun diminished, and it was now more some kind of a desperate act, as 50 year old Stewart Broad attempted—for the umpteenth time—to conquer his betting addiction, just throw the towel in on the entire situation for what he hoped was the last time.

The gambling was ruining his life and draining him of funds. Just to have his £20 bet on the horse-racing, something which happened every day without question, he would go without electricity and heating, even food on the table. Dramatically, of late, he'd lost a lot of weight and appeared somewhat gaunt as he tried to make ends meet and curb his addiction.

The £20 a day betting fiasco continued to eat into those fortnightly benefits payments, courtesy of Theresa May and her cronies in Westminster. Over seven days, and sometimes often totalled about £140 a week—and sometimes more, since he'd squander perhaps a one-off lucky (or unlucky) £50 on the horses on Joyous Saturdays. Saturday was the biggest race day of the week and more often than not seemed to pay punters more.

But Stewart Broad never seemed to win a penny.

What was he doing wrong? Why did the gods never frigging favour him? Why did everybody else win on the horses, but never him? God only knew he invested enough money in the old nags. Often he considered switching to football or rugby, or even cricket—or worse, American NFL—but no, he bartered with his senses—at the end of the day, nothing beat the horses.

There was no technique in horse-racing, he thought. It was pure luck. And everybody from here in England to the Australian Outback knew it was the most corrupt sport in the world. It was a notoriously familiar fact that horse-racing—whichever country it happened in—was bent as a nine-bob note.

Stewart's nerves were starting to rattle and crack as he crossed the line, betting more and more out of this desperation than fun. He became a thinner, poorer example of any human being, scruffy and unkempt, smelly, unwashed, unshaven, penniless and starving. Some nights, when the bookies' closed, if he was hungry, he'd go through bins on the roadside pavement, scabble through shit to get and munch on an apple core, or some half-consumed bag of cold fish and chips perhaps a kid had bought from Crosby's Chip Shop a few doors up from that den of vice and iniquity, the Bookies.

His family were mostly dead and gone. Yes, at 50 Stewart was a shambling wreck of a man, probably the last of the Broad clan, and it was true to say—admit to himself—he was slowly dying. He paused to ponder upon this factor in his existence as he limply searched Life and the Universe, and the trashcan, for some miracle to cure his woes.

It wouldn't happen, of course. Not in this mediocre town of Eggers in Cumbria.

Pondering, he asked himself, why not break his foot or even his leg just so he could claim Sickness Benefit... wouldn't that money go towards feeding him a decent hot meal for once or at least feed his addiction, betting on the horses?

The sound of serenity filled the air. Pausing, Stewart Broad tensed his eyes in the smog and surveyed the vicinity.

Who was that stranger across the road, sitting on the street bench, in the white suit, whistling loudly? The strange fellow was showing Stewart something—something in his hand—and as Stewart struggled to see, he made out from this distance it was indeed a crisp five pound note. The stranger in white stood, placed the note on the bench, and walked off—still whistling. Stewart ran across the narrow road towards the wooden bench and seized it.

He knew what he had to do and ran towards the Bookies. This was a sign!

Glancing at *The Racing Post* form on the Bookies' wall, Stewart wrote out a strange and complex bet which would command vast winnings if successful—for just a fiver. He picked the three horses, ones he saw coming in 1st, 2nd and 3rd, in that order—a Tri Cast, to name the particular bet he struck.

He watched the race on the TV screen. It took place in Dubai.

“Holy shit...” he muttered, as each horse crossed the line. At first, he said, “Shit, damn it, another loser!” but then, suddenly, he looked at the written slip in his hand, then back at the screen. He whooped as he realized he had in fact got a winner.

All three horses, in the order he wrote on the slip and handed the money in for, had come in—and roughly, he'd won about £650.

Kay, the woman behind the counter, shook her head miserably as she paid him out across the counter in twenty-pound notes. It was almost as if she was paying the winnings out of their own pocket.

Once Stewart held the entire amount of money in his grubby hands, he raised the wad to his lips and kissed them like a vast and recently awarded heavenly blessing. “I don't believe it,” he yelled, and laughed hysterically as he made his way towards the exit, “I don't believe it...I'm going to the pub, and then to Peking House for a Sweet and Sour!”

It may well have been a heavenly blessing.

“And I'm finished with gambling,” he called out, “No frigging more—from this point on, I will never gamble again—horse-racing can fuck off!”

Kay pushed her spectacles back onto the ridge of her nose. She'd heard it all before. He'd be back and, as ever with glee, she'd take his money.

But somebody was waiting for Stewart outside. The tall gentleman in the red suit said, “You promised me your mortal soul, Mr Broad. Don't you remember the deal...if I provided you with a win?”

Stewart Broad said incredulously, “I know I did—and I'm sorry. I was desperate. But please, I don't want to go to Hell. I just wanted a winner for a change! Please, don't take me to Hell, Mr Satan...”

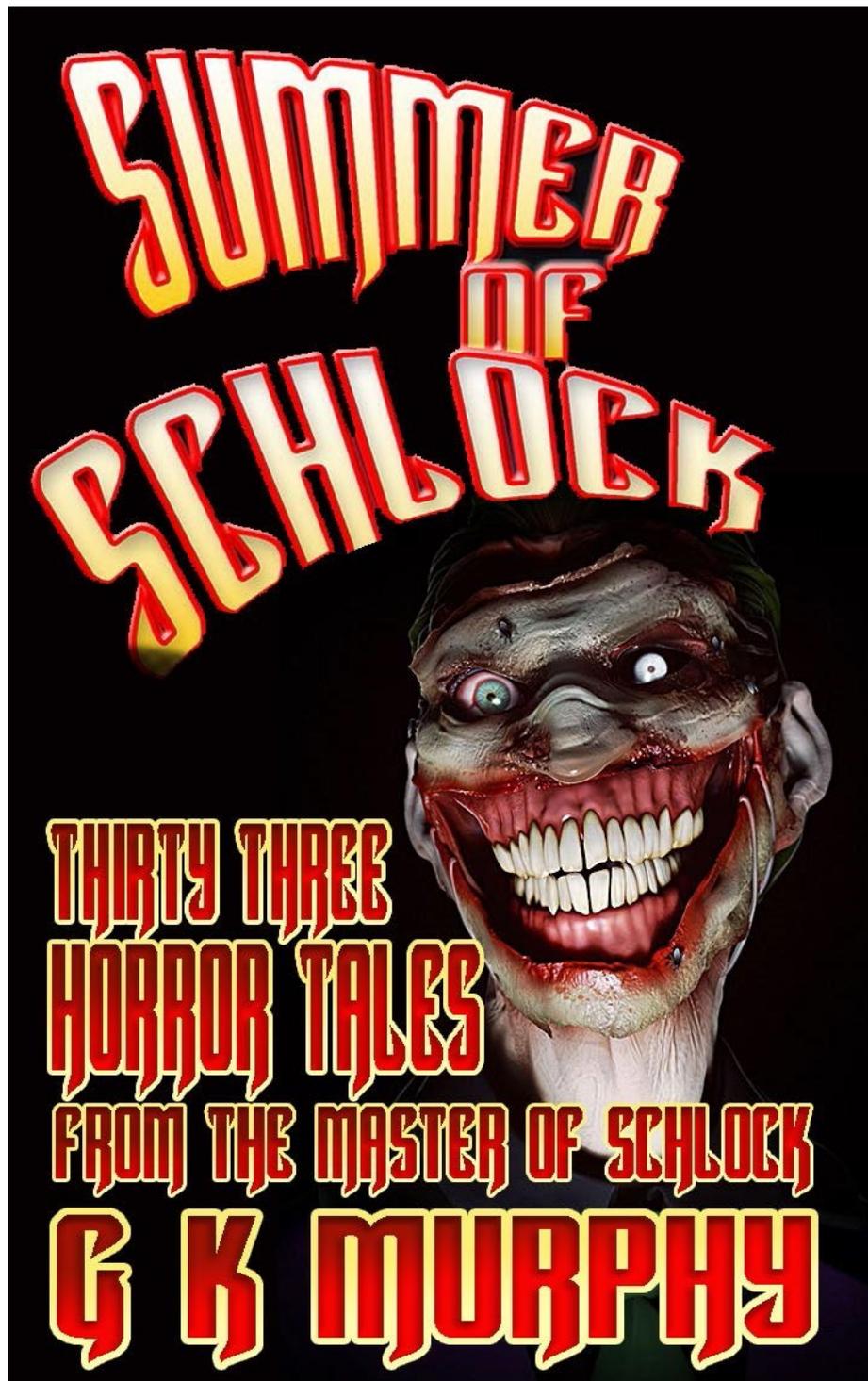
The old familiar street outside the bookies had transformed into a fiery alley, and in the distance in wave after long illuminated wave, the furnaces of Hell could be observed, and their vast soaring heat could be felt. The agreement money slid through Stewart's trembling, nervous fingers and fell to the floor as Satan reached out and grabbed him by the jugular and squeezed the life's breath from him. The suave Devil pursed his dark lips...

The insidious monster grinned and said, "At times like this, I often like to whistle..."

And the saddest tune continued the rest of the journey.

THE END

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[Return to Contents](#)

THE PACT by Steven Havelock

“Thank you for stopping, sir.”

“Where to, buddy?”

“St Mark’s church.”

“Sure, no problem, buddy.”

“I’m going to visit a grave.”

“Okay.”

“The grave of Kasim Mahmood.”

The dark rainy night outside made it been in the comfort of the warm air-conditioned cab even that much more pleasant.

“Do you know Kiezer Anwar?”

“Can’t say I do.”

“Not to worry.” He paused then continued. “I’m new to this small town. I need someone to find Kiezer Anwar.”

“Look up a private detective online,” said Abdul, the taxi driver.

“I would like to you to find him for me.”

“I’m no private detective, boss.”

“I’m offering one hundred thousand dollars to the person who finds him for me.”

Abdul did a double take.

“Whoa! One hundred thousand dollars?” His breath rattled through his smoke addled lungs “I’m your man! For that much I will find him for you definitely!”

The next afternoon, Abdul awoke. After a shower and then during breakfast, he said to his wife.

“Honey, you won’t believe the loon I met last night.”

“Oh, who was he?” His wife sat opposite him at the breakfast table.

“He offered me one hundred thousand dollars to find a man called Kiezer Anwar.” Abdul’s eyes bulged at the thought of the money.

“Amazing!” His wife’s face turned red, with greed.

“Are you sure, Abdul, and its not your illness? I mean you only got out of the mental hospital two months ago.”

“No, I’m 100% sure, I didn’t imagine it. Look here is the card the guy gave me; his name is Lewis Cipher.”

“You did take him up on the offer, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I sure did.” He looked around and saw the Yellow Pages in the corner of the room by the TV.

Abdul picked up the book, brought it to the breakfast table and started searching for the name Kiezer Anwar.

“Parveen Anwar,” said Abdul highlighting the name and noting the address in the phone book.

“I’m heading to see if I can find the guy this rich loon is after.”

Knock! Knock!

Abdul rapped on the door of Parveen Anwar.

Abdul heard the latch being undone and then sucked in a large breath as he saw the voluptuous woman who had opened the door.

Abdul was nearly in his fifties, but the woman that now stood in front of him made him feel like he was in his twenties again. He stared longer than he should have done.

Long dark black hair, extra large breasts and a tiny waist and the face... There was something about the face... Something familiar and alluring.

The woman stared at him, and Abdul knew that even though he was getting on in years, this black-haired beauty was aroused.

“Hello,” Abdul managed to stammer. Knowing he had an erection, he stepped in closer so the most beautiful woman he had seen in some time wouldn’t be able to see it.

“Hello,” he repeated, “I’m looking for a guy named Kiezer Anwar. Do you know him?”

“Yes, my father was called Kiezer Anwar. Do you want to come in and talk about it?”

Must be my lucky day, thought Abdul.

Inside they made small talk for a few minutes.

“So what did Kiezer Anwar look like and where does he live?”

“I never met my father and I don’t know what he looks like. All I know is his name and what my mother told me.”

“What did he do? Where did he work? Or hang out?”

“He used to live above the mosque in Sun Street for a while.”

“My mother wouldn’t talk about him, all she said to me one day was that he was the evillest man she had ever met. You look thirsty, hold on I will get you some water,” said Parveen.

She brought the water back, and handed it to Abdul. Their hands touched and something electric passed through them. Abdul stared deeply into Parveen’s eyes and saw lust.

Then in a heart beat they were kissing deeply. Abdul’s hands roamed without censure, feeling gorgeous large tits and a small tight ass and a waist to die for.

Parveen pressed her body against Abdul’s and soon they were on the floor making love.

An hour later Abdul was exhausted. He couldn’t remember the number of times he had come. He knew he should feel guilty about cheating on his loyal wife but he didn’t.

As he was driving home, he passed the train station, and just like last night he saw the loon who had stopped him and given the name Lewis Cipher.

The man was waving his hands trying to call his taxi. Abdul stopped and the man got in.

“Any luck?” he asked.

“Yes. I found his daughter and got an address of where he used to live. I’m going to go visit it tomorrow, as I’ve had a hectic day. I’m shattered!”

“You did well today,” said the man with a smile, and for an instant Abdul thought his eyes glowed red.

No. Impossible.

“Just drop me off by the church again, my friend.”

Abdul dropped him off and headed home.

The next day he was heading to the address that Parveen had given him.

The news came on the radio. “Parveen Anwar was found murdered early this morning. Police are appealing for anyone who might have seen her recently to come forward so they can be eliminated from their enquiries.”

Oh my God! Dead! But who could have done it? Don't think about it, just concentrate on getting that hundred thousand pounds.

Abdul parked outside a mosque where Parveen said her dad had stayed sometimes. He went in but wasn't in there for long.

When the Imaam saw him, before Abdul could open his mouth he screamed, "Get out of this holy place! You are going to hell!" The Imaam punched him.

Abdul fell to the floor, kicks landed on his body and a vicious punch on his head, he just managed to get up and run to his taxi. He drove off with the Imaam banging on his windows.

What the hell was all that about? His head really hurt. He was going to pass out.

Abdul managed to park the taxi a few streets away before passing out. When he came round again it was 9 PM on a cold November night.

He needed to get home and get some food and rest.

On his way home he passed the train station again. There, just like yesterday, was Lewis Cipher, waving him down.

Abdul stopped the taxi and picked him up.

"Church again, right?"

This guy is a proper loon, visiting a grave at 9 PM on a freezing cold night.

"You did well again today."

I don't know what the loon means.

Abdul kept quiet and dropped him off. He was driving back home with the radio on when the news came on.

"An Imaam was found murdered at Sun Street mosque today. Police are appealing for anyone who might have seen something to come forward."

The next day Abdul was awoken by a loud knocking on his front door.

"It's the police, open up or we are going to break the door down!"

His wife opened the door. The police swarmed in and dragged Abdul still in his pyjamas from his bed.

"What's this all about?" his wife screamed.

“We are arresting you, Abdul Hack, for the murders of two people, Parveen Anwar and the Imaam, Kalid Syed, at the mosque. A witness saw your car and contacted us.”

Abdul was read his rights and then dragged outside and taken to the local police station for questioning. In his cell the police asked if he wanted a solicitor, to which he replied in the affirmative. He waited in the side room for the duty solicitor and then after about fifteen minutes, the solicitor was there.

“Oh my God! What are you doing here?”

It was Lewis Cipher.

“I come to collect a debt.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You see, I’ve been looking for Kiezer Anwar for over two decades.”

“Okay, what’s that got to do with me?” Abdul felt his pulse racing. “And what debt are you trying to collect?”

“I will explain all if you give me a moment.

“You see, Kiezer and I made a pact. He would give me his soul in return for the best everything the world could offer him.”

Lewis Cipher...? Lucifer...? Something clicked in Abdul.

This guy is the flipping Devil.

“What in God’s name do you want with me?”

“I’m coming to that.

“You see, Kiezer got cold feet and tried to back out of the deal.”

“How can you back out of a deal with the Devil?”

“He met many people, and eventually a person very deep in the occult told him he had to kill someone and eat their heart and then he would be free of the pact.”

“So he found an asylum seeker, Kasim Mahmood, who had no family or friends. Someone living under the radar so the police didn’t even know he existed. Kiezer killed him and ate his heart. And after that I lost track of him. But I don’t give up easily...nobody cheats me! Eventually a man named Abdul Hack was released from the local mental hospital two months ago.”

“Yes, that’s me...what’s any of this got to do with me?”

“I’m coming to that. You see Kiezer had a daughter named Parveen Anwar.”

“Yes, I know that I found that out, and Kiezer was her father. I learnt that much for myself.”

“You see Kiezer was hard to find as he had had plastic surgery.”

“Okay...okay...” Something started to click in Abdul’s mind.

I was released from a mental hospital just two months ago, after God knows how long. And I have no memory about what my life was like before I entered it. My family told me I was just a taxi driver who had a severe stroke.

“Who murdered all those people?”

“It was you.”

“What, but how could I? I have no memory of it.”

“The murders were guided by my hand. You have no memory because I took possession of your body. You changed your face, your name and everything else about yourself.”

Lewis Cipher’s devil eyes stared at him. They glowed a spectral red.

“You erased your memory by eating a man’s heart!”

Abdul started to shake. He knew he was in trouble now.

“Are they going to lock me up for the murders?”

“There’s a place worse than prison for you, Kiezer.”

THE END

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[Return to Contents](#)

WANDERING MONSTERS by Gavin Chappell

The animated statues stomped down the drive, their sculpted feet sending up hissing sprays of gravel as they came. The four youths sprinted down to the T-junction with the winding track at the end of the drive. Percy stared over his shoulder at the impossible sight.

‘Which way?’

‘Does it matter?’ Norman complained. ‘We’ve got to get away from those... things!’

‘Why don’t we fight them?’ Brian brandished his bastard sword.

‘You saw what happened to my sword when I tried that,’ Percy said. ‘It broke. Do you want to break your own sword?’

Brian shook his head emphatically.

‘Let’s go this way.’ Gerald pointed northwards. ‘If we go the other way, we’ll end up back on the Wagon Road with all the refugees from Kashamash, and the barbarians were attacking them. Come on!’

By now, the slow-moving statues were halfway down the drive; slow they were, but they were relentless. The youths sprinted frantically up the dusty track.

It led them through another pine forest, whose sap was sweet scented and heady. The day was warm and from a bright blue sky the sun slanted down through the dark ranks of trees, but as they crested a rise they saw before them ridge upon pine-swathed ridge, vanishing into the north where snow-covered peaks shimmered in seeming defiance of the sunshine. Far below, Gerald saw a ravine crossed by a single thread-like rope-bridge.

A look over his shoulder confirmed that the statues were stomping through the trees towards them. ‘Down this way,’ he told the others. ‘Make for the rope-bridge.’

The other three followed him, slipping and sliding in the orange sandy soil as they made their way down the slope. It was about a quarter of a mile to the ravine.

‘What’s the use?’ Norman asked, clinging to a tree root as he negotiated his way round some crumbly rocks. ‘Those things are just going to follow us forever.’

‘We pissed off their dark master and no mistake,’ said Percy.

‘Killing wizards has that effect,’ said Gerald airily. ‘Keep moving. I’ve got an idea.’

‘Look!’ shouted Brian urgently, pointing up the slope.

Norman looked back to see the first of the statues standing motionless at the head of the rise, sightless eyes seeming to watch their progress. As it did so, the other statues appeared at its side. Then it stepped forward... and slipped!

They watched in silent terror as the marble statue went cartwheeling down the slope towards them, striking rocks and roots as it did so, smashing off an arm here, a hand there. Norman leap aside as the main body of the statue plunged straight past him. He clung onto the root for dear life. If that thing had hit him...! He looked down to see the statue lying at the bottom of the slope, its head some yards from its torso.

To Norman's horror, the headless trunk began to rise.

It stood at the foot of the slope, bone-white in the gloom of the pines, waving its remaining handless arm threateningly. Despite its partial dismemberment, Norman knew that it could easily pulverize any of them.

'Fuck.' Percy pointed upwards. 'Looks like its chums are coming down.'

The other statues were slowly, circumspectly, descending the slope, as if the precipitous plunge of their fellow had taught them to be more cautious. Norman shivered. These things were capable of learning as well as movement.

'Bit of a cliff-hanger this one,' said Gerald thoughtfully.

Brian drew his bastard sword from its sheath on his back. Then he leapt down the slope towards the battered statue.

'What's he doing?' Norman cried. 'He'll be killed!'

Sand and pebbles trickled down from the slope from where the other statues were more cautiously descending. 'I think he's got the better idea,' said Percy. 'Better than hanging around here: those other ones are getting close.'

Looking up, Norman saw the first statue looming over him. With a squawk, he let go of the root.

All was confusion as he went rolling and slithering down the slope. The sky and the earth whirled round and round him. He caught a glimpse of Brian at the bottom of the slope facing down the statue with his bastard sword, then he hit something with enough force to knock the breath from him. There was a smashing sound. He lay in the grit, wheezing desperately, trying to get his breath back.

After a moment, Brian appeared, grinning, sticking out his hand to help him up.

'That's one down,' he said as Norman allowed himself to be hauled to his feet. 'You don't mess about in a fight, do you, Norman?'

As the breath seeped back painfully into his lungs, Norman saw that the area around him was scattered with marble fragments. He realised he had hit the statue a glancing blow when he came down, sending it crashing into jagged, knifelike rocks. Then he saw to his nausea that the pieces of marble were twitching with life.

In the midst of a small avalanche, Gerald and Percy slithered down to join them. ‘Never mind admiring your handiwork, Norman,’ Gerald shouted. ‘The rest of them are following, and I don’t think you’re in any position to try that trick again!’

He grabbed the still wheezing Norman by the arm and dragged him down the path through the forest towards the rope-bridge. The three remaining statues ploughed their way down the slope as the adventurers hurried through the trees.

‘So what’s the plan?’ Norman rasped. He was bruised and sore all down one side, and had scratches over his face.

‘We get over that rope-bridge and once we’re on the other side and the statues are on the bridge we cut it down,’ Gerald said. ‘You ever seen any Tarzan movies?’

Norman halted, frowning. The tread of the statues galvanized him into fresh movement and he hurried to keep up with the others. ‘We can’t do that!’ he said. ‘Somebody put that rope-bridge up for a reason! What will they think when they find some vandal has cut it down? Gerald...!’

By now, they had reached the edge of the ravine. The rope-bridge hung across directly ahead of them. The ravine below went down about five or six hundred feet to a river that rushed through a gorge. Gerald jumped up onto the swaying wooden slats of the bridge. The only handhold was a couple of ropes at waist height. Norman didn’t like the look of it one bit.

The statues came crashing through the trees again. He looked back. One down, three to go, he thought.

Gerald and Percy were already walking along the bouncing, swaying bridge. Brian brandished his bastard sword and took up a heroic stance.

‘Fly, you fools!’ he shouted over his shoulder. He looked at Norman. ‘And you, Norm!’

Norman grabbed Brian by the arm and dragged him struggling onto the bridge. Despite Brian’s demands to be allowed to stay behind and defend them, despite the bone-chilling wind that sent the rope-bridge pitching back and forth, they caught up with Gerald and Percy about halfway. The rope-bridge bowed considerably under everyone’s weight.

Gerald snatched the handhold and hung on to it desperately, scowling back at Norman. ‘Don’t get too close, dickhead!’ he said. ‘This isn’t the Menai Suspension Bridge. Too much weight and it might...’

He broke off, eyes bulging as he stared over Norman’s shoulder. The bridge began to bounce and leap more than ever. Powerful vibrations shuddered up and down it. Feeling sick, Norman turned to see the surviving statues stomping along the rope-bridge in pursuit of them.

For a moment, it remained stretched across the ravine.

Then there was a supersonic snap and the entire structure broke like an inexpertly tuned guitar string. For the second time that day, Norman found himself tumbling helplessly, head-over-heels, through empty space.

The cliffs whizzed past. His friends fell with him, arms and legs flailing; the statues too, though these fell at a faster velocity, vanishing with a succession of splashes into the river below. Then the fast-flowing waters rose inexorably to meet Norman and he plunged helplessly into the river's beer-brown depths.

Several hundred yards further on, his drenched head burst from the water. His fair hair plastered black against his skull, he spat water, trod water, until the current caught him and dragged him like a Pooh-stick going over a weir.

He fetched up against a sandbank in the lee of a cliff where the ravine grew less steep and scrubby vegetation clung to either cliff. As he tiredly drew himself up onto his hands and knees, he heard panicked shouting from the water. Turning, he saw a desperate figure dragged past by the current. Without thinking, he flung himself into the water and swam out at an oblique angle, catching up with the dark head some way downstream. He grabbed the drowning youth by the shoulders just like in all the lifesaving lessons he'd had and began swimming back using doggy paddle.

The current was too great. It pulled them further down the river then flung them up onto another bank where pines fringed either bank. He looked down to see that it was Gerald he'd saved.

Just then, he heard a splashing from further down the beach and another figure was vomited up out of the water to lie there, dreary, depressed and half-dead. Norman went over to roll him over. It was Percy. The moment he was on his back, he began to cough up water. Norman knelt down to give him the kiss of life.

Percy bashed him away, rolled over, puked. Rolled back. 'Don't come near me, you faggot!' he snapped, scowling furiously.

As he held his throbbing cheek where Percy had whacked him, Norman was worried by the idea that his friend might think he was gay. He wasn't gay, he really quite liked women, particularly his mum. Not so much his sister, but she was just a girl anyway. He found the girls at the girls' school terrifying, but he didn't want anyone to know that! Anyway, he didn't reckon they were what his mum would call "nice girls." He certainly wasn't turned on by blokes, oh no, and as for kissing them—eew!

'I was just trying to unblock your air passages,' he explained. That was what they had taught him when he got his lifesaving certificate.

'You keep your dirty little tongue away from my passages, mate!' Percy said, climbing unsteadily to his knees. He looked up and down the little beach, and saw Gerald's motionless form.

"Where's that twat Brian?' he demanded.

Norman sat cross-legged. 'I don't know,' he said sadly. 'I think he was dragged away by the current... P-Percy? What are you staring at?'

Percy was looking in amazement over Norman's shoulder. Norman whirled round and stopped, stunned. For a moment, he thought the animated statues had caught up with them.

Thrusting up out of the water of the little bay, which was formed by a bend in the river, was a sword blade. It rose higher and higher upwards until Norman saw that a hand gripped it. Up came an arm, clad in sopping wet black linen. Then a dripping head, followed by shoulders, a torso. Norman sighed. It was Brian.

'... held Excalibur aloft from the bosoms of the water!' he was ranting. 'Showing by the divine providential why I, Brian, am your king!' He grinned at everyone, and shook the dripping sword over his head as if he was posing for a Frank Frazetta painting.

Gerald rolled over, his face a pale green. 'Somebody shut that wanker up for god's sake...' he moaned.

A couple of hours later the orange sun was setting behind the western walls of the ravine. Percy had set fire to a pile of dried driftwood by rubbing a piece of pine against a larger bit of oak for much longer than seemed reasonable, then using the resulting glow to set alight some dry grass, then the firewood.

'Better than Immiel could do with flint and tinder,' he boasted as the air grew cold and the sun descended. Soon the only source of light and heat was his fire. He caught sight of Gerald's face looking like a slapped arse and said no more.

At least there'd been no sign of those statues. Either they'd been washed away or they were buried themselves in the mud at the bottom of the river.

'We've got no food,' Brian complained, kicking at the sand.

'What are you talking about?' Gerald said, still shivering from his inadvertent dip. 'We got loads of food from the house of the sorcerer.'

'It's all been soaked,' said Norman dismally. 'The stuff that survived the plunge. The rest was washed away by the water.' He turned his backpack upside down and out seeped a sludge of waterlogged bread and the broken glass of a jar he had grabbed.

Percy slapped his brow, not something he was prone to. 'What the fuck are we going to do now?'

Norman shrugged. 'How should we know?' he asked. 'You're the crazy survivalist guy who can make a catapult out of someone else's Y-front elastic.' A sore point, Norman's Y-fronts had been slipping down his thighs ever since. 'You tell us.'

Percy sat down by the fire. Disconsolately, he poked it with a stick. 'Suppose we're going to have to find some,' he muttered to himself. He rolled over on his side, lay by the fire, and shivered as shadows lengthened.

'At least those statues have stopped following us,' Norman pointed out.

Gerald shuddered violently. He seemed to think that Norman was tempting fate with this statement. Norman lay on his back and went to sleep.

He was awoken by a nameless dread. His body ached. Beneath him lay hard-packed grit and in his nostrils was a stale smell of smoke. His belly was painfully empty and his eyes were gummy. With a manful effort, he cracked open an eyelid and bright sunlight lanced agonizingly into his skull. It was like being stabbed in the brain with a letter opener. He groaned, and sank back.

He wasn't used to being woken by a nameless dread. Normally it was his mum telling him to get up, get washed, get his school clothes on and his breakfast down him before the school bus turned up. Of course, he was no longer living at home. He had left Earth itself for this mysterious planet among the stars. God, he wished he was back home.

A second time, he slowly opened first one eye then the other. The scene that met his bleary eyes depressed him.

Percy sat beside the smoking remains of the fire, poking at it with a stick in his hand, an expression of fierce concentration on his face. Brian leant against a rock with his beloved bastard sword across his knees, staring at it, occasionally rubbing at patches of rust with a handful of sand. Gerald lay snoring lightly on the other side of the cold campfire.

Norman got to his feet, staggering slightly.

'What's for breakfast?' he demanded.

Percy looked up darkly. 'Gerald, if he doesn't wake up soon,' he said.

With a swinish grunt, Gerald awoke, and looked around blinking as his friends burst into laughter.

'Wha's the big joke?' he mumbled.

'Get your arse into gear, Gerald,' Percy said. 'Time we were travellin' on.'

'What's for breakfast?' Gerald demanded. 'Stop laughing, Brian. You've got nothing to laugh at.'

'You've got nothing for breakfast,' Percy said. 'None of us have. We're going to have to find something.'

At a leisurely pace, they gathered their few belongings, consisting mainly of weapons and empty backpacks. Then, with Percy in the lead, they scrambled up the bank and into the undergrowth beyond. Soon they were beneath the musty pines, walking in utter silence across a carpet of needles. Norman was glad to put the river behind them. All the time he'd been expecting the statues to wade up out of its murky depths.

Red squirrels skittered up the trunks and leapt from branch to branch. Hump-shaped anthills dotted the forest floor. Birds soared above the treetops. The air was fresh and invigorating. As Norman marched alongside the others, the gloom that had settled on his heart dissolved and

vanished. He was happy, glad to be alive. It was a beautiful place for a walk. For perhaps the first time since they came to this world, he was full of joy. But he was still aching with hunger. A strange, surreal, silver shimmer seemed to hang over everything. The results of his hunger? Or weariness?

‘What’s that?’ Percy hissed as they turned a corner. Norman’s eyes widened.

‘I’m not interested,’ said Gerald, who was in a bad mood, ‘unless you can eat it...’

He trailed away as he also saw the thing.

Brian brandished his bastard sword. Norman grabbed him and dragged him backwards before he could do himself a mischief. Percy helped him pinion the fool against a tree trunk.

‘Stop being a pillock!’ Percy hissed. ‘You can’t fight that... thing! Anyway, it’s doing us no harm!’

Norman looked back over his shoulder. Surely Percy was right.

Nibbling delicately at the branches of a tree at the further edge of a clearing, standing up on its back legs, was a tawny-furred creature the size and shape of a lion, although its tail was reptilian and at the end of this was what looked like a snake’s head. Even stranger were the two heads: one like that of a lion; the other, the one chomping at the pine needles, a goat’s.

They watched it eating for a long time, each of them gripped by wonder.

‘What is it?’ asked Norman. ‘It looks sort of... mutated!’

‘Fuck knows, mate,’ Percy began. ‘Maybe it’s lived too long next to a nuclear power station...’ He broke off again as they all heard a crashing noise from the trees nearby.

Something burst out of the forest shadows and stalked into the sunlight. Seeing the first creature, it put back its head, flapped its wings, and screamed like an eagle.

Although this new monstrosity was also leonine in bulk and form, its massive head was beaked and feathered and had an eagle’s mad glaring eyes. The creature had the wings of an eagle as well, and it flapped them as it prowled towards the first monster.

The latter dropped down onto all fours on seeing the newcomer, and it gave a lion-like roar.

‘Are they going to fight or aren’t they?’ Norman said, as the eagle-headed lion screeched in reply. It was like watching two meatheads kicking off on each other outside a pub on match day.

The three-headed creature plunged at the other monster, sinking its lion-fangs into its enemy’s avian throat. The eagle-head went rolling over and over, with the lion-head tearing at it with its claws.

It flapped its wings harshly, striking its attacker with them. The other monster attacked it with its snakehead and even gored it with its goat horns but it could not free itself. The undergrowth was trampled down as the two monsters fought desperately.

The four youths crouched in the shadows of the trees, watching the combat in terror. Norman was afraid to move in case one of the monsters spotted him and attacked.

‘I think we should risk it...’ Percy muttered, when Norman voiced this fear. ‘Those things are pretty preoccupied.’ But even as he spoke, the eagle-headed monster sank its beak deep into its enemy’s breast and tore out a gory collection of guts.

The other monster collapsed into the undergrowth. The eagle-head screeched in triumph, then settled down to tear the flesh from the body of its prey and gulp it down.

Norman watched in horror. It was like something from a David Attenborough documentary, but you didn’t get the stink of blood or shit on the telly, as the defeated beast died in its own gore. It turned his stomach.

Percy rose. ‘Come on, time to make a move,’ he hissed.

The eagle-headed monster paused suddenly. It lifted its head, beak streaked with blood, and turned first one way then the other. Its mad eyes glared. Percy froze. The monster returned to its feast.

Gerald tugged at Percy’s trouser leg. ‘Get back down, you tit,’ he hissed. Slowly, cautiously, Percy did so. He crossed his legs and looked around at the others, his eyes wide.

‘What do we do now?’ he asked.

The noise of the monster eating was loud and sickening. Norman shook his head. It was disgusting, listening to the monster gulping down raw, bloody flesh, and crunching bones. And it was particularly frustrating to see a monster stuffing its face when he hadn’t eaten since yesterday.

‘We’ll have to wait,’ he said.

Gerald nodded fearfully. ‘Otherwise we’ll wind up on the menu too.’

They lay among the trees at the edge of the clearing as the monster wolfed down gobbets of its fellow creature. At last, the thing gorged itself to its own satisfaction, and it staggered off into the trees on the far side.

The four youths left the trees and looked in revolted, morbid fascination at the bloody remains of the monster. The lion head was gone completely, while the goat head, half eaten, lolled from the remains of a ribcage. Percy poked the gory mess gingerly with a stout stick.

‘I don’t suppose we could eat that thing,’ he said, looking green at the very thought.

Gerald shuddered. ‘Probably poisonous,’ he told him.

‘What was it?’ Norman asked. ‘And what was the other one?’

Gerald looked thoughtful. ‘They looked a bit like those manicures...’

‘Manticores,’ Percy interrupted with irritation.

‘...manticores, okay, that took a fancy to Brian... but you weren’t with us then, were you, Norman? You’d swanned off with that bunch of actors...’

‘They’re just monsters,’ said Percy shortly. He turned and walked away.

They followed him through the trees and up a slope, in the opposite direction from that taken by the surviving creature. The ground grew rocky and the trees petered out into heathland. A chill wind blew up here despite the blue sky and the sun, and Norman found himself shivering.

‘What’s that, over there?’

Percy and Gerald had reached a rise above a boggy patch and were looking down on the other side of the hill. Norman and Brian squelched up to join them.

Below was another series of pine-swathed ridges, but drifting up into the air some way ahead were several smoke trails.

Norman shook with fear. ‘Is it the barbarians?’ he asked. ‘Have they come here?’

Gerald shook his head. ‘No,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘I think it’s a village. Maybe a town.’

‘Out here in the wilderness?’ Norman demanded.

‘The wilderness has to stop sooner or later,’ Gerald replied.

Norman looked back at the smoke trails. Yes, it could be a village. Beyond it, the hills grew ever steeper, and across the horizon marched the snow-capped peaks.

‘If it’s a village,’ said Brian in a small voice, ‘they might have food there.’

‘It’s miles away, though,’ said Percy. ‘It’ll take days to get there. Let’s hope they do have food, ‘cause we’re going to need it.’

‘We need it right now,’ said Gerald dejectedly.

They strode down the side of the hill, entering the trees shortly after. There was no sign of human habitation as they walked. It was woodland untouched by human hands, it seemed. They kept their eyes open for a sign of other monsters but they saw nothing but a pair of roebucks all day.

They drank from a stream, despite Norman’s misgivings, and it did something to revive them. When the roebucks appeared in a clearing ahead of them, Percy tried to bring one down by lobbing a rock at it, but both sprang away into the trees in a flash. After that, Percy

improvised a kind of throwing stick, which he practiced with by throwing it at rabbits. But he didn't bring any of them down, and after a few tries, the rabbits all vanished into their burrows.

As it grew towards evening, all were feeling too weak from hunger to go on, and they lay down in the lee of a cliff to sleep. Despite his exhaustion and the pain from his fall the other day, Norman found himself drifting in and out of consciousness.

The next morning, they awoke cold and hungry to find that a light mist had settled on the forest. The air itself was moist. It was like being inside a cloud. They rose and started walking through the trees again.

By midday, the mist had risen but drizzle had replaced it. Norman staggered along with his head back and his mouth open, trying to catch the falling drops. He stumbled as he walked, and as he did so his head came down. He halted dead still.

As a sheet of rain opened briefly, he glimpsed a figure standing on a shelf of rock further down the hill. Norman rubbed his eyes and looked again. The figure had gone like a forgotten dream.

'Wassup, Norman?' asked Gerald. Rain dripped from the end of his nose as he looked quizzically at his friend.

'I saw someone!' said Norman excitedly.

'Oh god,' said Percy. 'I knew it would happen. Too much walking, not enough food. Someone was going to crack up first. And it had to be Norman.'

Norman resented this. 'I tell you I saw someone!' he insisted. 'A tall man. Dressed in skins.'

'Probably a caveman,' suggested Brian. 'Or a cannibal, like those hillmen we met. He'll want to eat our livers.'

'I'd happily eat your liver, Brian, if you don't shut up,' Gerald offered.

'Where did this caveman guy go, then?' Percy asked. He was drenched. 'If we could find a nice dry cave to hole up in until this downpour stops, that would be a definite bonus.'

'If he's got any food to share I'd be happy to show him how to invent the wheel,' Gerald added.

The four youths stood despondently on the rain-drenched hillside, futilely searching the slopes for signs of a cave, or even a caveman.

'I'm not standing around in all this,' said Gerald. 'Let's see if we can find the guy.'

He walked off through the driving rain and the others followed.

As they reached the valley floor, the rain eased off again, and then ended, although the skies remained threatening. The youths began to explore the surrounding woods.

‘There he is!’ shouted Percy.

Norman turned to see a face peering at them from behind a tree. On his second glimpse, he saw that it was an old man with a beard and a thatch of white hair. He had a confused, horrified look on his face, which was by no means that of a caveman. His clothes, though crude, were made of untanned leather.

‘Hey!’ said Gerald, running forward. ‘Can we talk to you? We’ve been lost in these woods for days and we’re starving... hey! Where are you going?’

The old man turned tail and bounded off through the trees to the northeast, his beard and matted hair streaming behind him.

‘After him!’ shouted Percy. ‘After him! We need food!’

Shouting excitedly, the four youths raced after the old man.

They blundered through the trees, high on adrenalin. The old man stumbled and staggered now as he ran ahead of them. He was pretty spry all the same, Norman thought as they came out beside a cliff.

Gaping in its side was a dark cave. Maybe the man was a caveman, Norman thought, but he looked no different from a retired old guy who collected his pension from the post office every week.

Suddenly the old man stopped. He turned slowly, his face a mask, his skin purpling in a rictus, his eyes bulging. He clawed at the air, mouth opening and closing but nothing coming out.

‘He’s a wizard!’ Brian shouted, brandishing his bastard sword. ‘He’s going to cast a spell on us!’

The old man fell flat on his face and did not move.

In the silence that followed, Percy said, ‘What kind of a spell is that?’ in an aggrieved voice.

Gerald went over and nudged the fallen figure with his foot. He rolled it over on its back. The look of horror on the old man’s face was sickening to see.

‘A falling over dead spell, apparently,’ he reported, crouching down to check for a pulse in the old man’s neck. ‘This guy’s dead as a doornail.’

‘Shit...’ said Brian in an awed whisper.

Gerald shrugged. ‘Must have had a heart attack,’ he said. ‘All the running... Seeing Brian with that bastard sword... and Norman’s ugly face... It was all too much for the poor guy.’

‘That isn’t funny!’ Norman shouted angrily. ‘Poor old man. We killed him!’

Brian was investigating the cave. He came out with his arms full of edible roots, bundles of herbs, strings of dried fungi and even a few half-chewed rabbit bones. There was a roughly made pottery jug as well, which on close inspection turned out to contain some kind of homebrewed mead. And half a hard, chewy loaf made of some rough kind of flour that Percy suggested might be mainly acorn.

Even Norman forgot his qualms, joining them eating up the old man's larder while the corpse cooled in the gloaming. The sun set as they sat in the cave entrance by a fire they had built with the old man's wood supply and passed around the jug of mead. Their bellies were full and they were feeling nicely warm inside—in fact, they got quite drunk. Soon they were all asleep.

Norman woke up in the morning, feeling hungry again. That was the problem with eating, it didn't matter how much you stuffed yourself, the next day you were always hungry again. He investigated what remained of the old man's food store and discovered that they'd scoffed the lot last night, except a stale crust of the acorn flour loaf. He chewed on this unenthusiastically while the others snored beside the fire. Then he went over and stared worriedly at the old man's body. It had gone stiff in the night, it stank, and flies were buzzing round it in clouds, however much Norman tried to wave them away.

The trees rustled.

Norman's hair quivered with independent life. A beaked, winged, lion-like creature slunk out into the small clearing. It was the monster they had seen before, but now it was right in front of Norman, staring at him.

It approached the old man's corpse, and pawed at it in puzzlement. Then it looked up at Norman again, and those eyes that had looked so wild and crazy were liquid pools of sorrow. It reminded Norman of a dog begging for food.

He stared at it for a moment, then at the hunk of bread in his hand. Then he threw the crust like a dog biscuit. The creature leapt into the air with a single beat of its wings and caught the bread, swallowing it in one go. It landed with a thump on all four feet, gave Norman another long, lingering stare, then turned and slunk back into the forest.

Norman stared after it for a long time.

He felt bad about the old man's death. This brave guy had lived alone in the middle of a monster-haunted wilderness. It looked like he'd even befriended the things. And Norman and his friends had chased the old man through the woods until he had a heart attack.

When the others woke up, somewhere round midday, he told them what he thought.

'So what d'you reckon we should do, Norman?' Gerald asked gravely.

'I think we should take his body to that town or village over the hill,' Norman said. 'He must have come from there, right? There's nowhere else in this wilderness apart from the sorcerer's house, and I don't think he came from there. He might even have had family in town. We should go there and tell them what happened. Make up for what we've done.'

He was expecting mockery from the others, but they all looked serious, and Gerald nodded. Even Brian was sombre.

‘Give ourselves up for justice,’ Percy said. ‘Yeah, it’s the best we can do.’

‘Poor old bugger didn’t mean us any harm,’ said Brian repentantly. ‘And look what we did to him.’

‘So it’s decided, then?’ Norman said. The sheer size of the task had suddenly become clear to him, and he half wanted them to tell him to forget it. They’d have to lug the old man’s body over the hills until they got to the town and then, who knows, they might end up in prison or something.

But the others were resolute. ‘Grab his legs, Norman,’ said Gerald, gripping the old man’s stiff shoulders. ‘We can take it in turns to carry him. The other two can keep these bastard flies off him.’

They set off, carrying the corpse through the woods, which now seemed dark, gloomy and threatening where previously they had been bright and merry, even when it was raining. The old man’s body was incredibly heavy, and Norman was soon panting with exertion. They stopped for a rest by a stream. Norman suggested they change over.

Percy and Brian took the old man’s corpse, and Norman found himself having to carry Brian’s bastard sword, which was almost as heavy. He didn’t like carrying it either; he hated the idea of something that was designed for killing.

Their path led them round the side of a hill and then down into a valley. They hadn’t seen the smoke trails for a while, and Norman was hoping that Gerald’s sense of direction would keep them going the right way. He was beginning to lose hope, to picture them wandering round and round the woods as the old man’s corpse decomposed, rotted away until all they were left with was a skeleton.

But then they came out of the birch trees at the top of a slope, and saw a paved road leading through the valley below.

Norman and Gerald were holding the body again, but Gerald handed the legs to Percy and hurried down the slope. Norman followed him.

‘No traffic,’ said Gerald, standing in the middle of the road.

Norman pointed out the fresh horse manure scattered along the paving stones. ‘Someone’s been along here recently,’ he said. ‘Which way would the town be?’

Gerald pointed up the road. ‘It must be that way,’ he said, ‘if this road leads there.’

‘It must do,’ said Norman. ‘Where else would it go?’

Gerald beckoned Brian and Percy to join them and they came down the slope, staggering under the weight of the old man’s corpse.

‘This way,’ said Gerald.

They turned a corner and saw the smoke trails rising over the trees. Feeling a mix of relief and dread for what was to come, Norman led them down the road. Round another corner, the trees gave way to fields, and he saw a track leading to a small farm on the right. Then the village itself appeared on the horizon. It had several well-built half-timbered buildings and five or six paved streets.

It wasn’t exactly bustling, but as they passed the first few buildings, people appeared at windows or stared at them from alleyways. Norman prickled with self-consciousness.

A group of villagers lounged in the square, around a cattle trough. The four youths approached them in silence. Percy and Brian put the old man’s body down respectfully. Norman looked at Gerald. ‘Say something to them....’ he hissed. Gerald looked stricken.

A man stepped up with his arms spread wide. He wore a red doublet and yellow hose, a floppy, feathered hat shadowed his broad, open face, and he wore a chain of gold round his chest.

‘Thank you! Thank you!’ he called. ‘You have saved our village! How can we ever repay you?’

Norman and Gerald exchanged another glance. Percy scratched his head. Brian looked about, mouth gaping.

‘Guh?’ Gerald managed at last.

‘No, I think you’ve made a mistake,’ said Norman helpfully. ‘We were up in the hills and we met this old man and...’

‘And you killed him!’ said the extravagantly dressed man.

‘Yes, well, we didn’t mean...’

‘You killed him; Sator, the evil wizard who has plagued our village for years. The terrible old man who lived alone on the mountainside with griffins for friends, casting hexes on our folk and murrains upon our fields, stealing babies from their cots...’

Gerald scowled. ‘He did all that?’ He kicked the old man’s body. ‘What a bastard! Now I’m glad we killed him!’

‘And you’ll be well rewarded,’ the man promised. ‘Let me introduce myself. I am Gall, hereditary mayor of Wishbone Village. For many years, Sator has blighted our lives. We hired mercenaries to hunt him down, but the monsters that prowl the hillsides must have killed them, since they never returned. Now, thanks to you, Sator’s reign of terror is over. We shall celebrate tonight with a feast. You may stay here for as long as you like, as our honoured guests. This is a wealthy place, on a trade route from the Mountain Duchies to the free cities of the plain. We have the finest of wines, the choicest of meats, the most seductive slave girls—all of which you may sample, absolutely gratis.’

He clapped his hands and a tall, thin man with a goatee stepped forward.

‘Dool! Arrange accommodation for our travellers. These brave youths must receive the best treatment Wishbone Village can offer. Take them away, bathe them, give them new vestments, and fulfil their every need. And arrange for the ceremonial burning of the wizard’s body.’

In a daze, Norman and his friends allowed themselves to be led away.

That night they were feted as heroes. The entire village lined up to congratulate them on their achievement and to thank them for freeing the village from the shadow that had hung over them for so long. Norman listened in amazement. He was finally a hero! Girls looked at him with frank admiration. Men clapped him on the back and shook his hand. He drank draught after draught of wine, filled his belly with fine meat and bread. Songs were sung, lutes strummed, dances danced by tall women with big hair and long, swirling, pleated dresses. Wine and admiration was a heady mix, Norman discovered, and much of the night passed in a blur, until the villagers led the four heroes to the house that had been set aside for them.

Norman slept that night in a featherbed under silk sheets. The night before he had spent on the hard ground, beneath the stars—and the rainclouds. Fortune’s wheel had turned again.

But it wasn’t right.

Next morning, he leant back in a scented bathtub as a dark haired young woman scrubbed luxuriously at his back. Another girl was feeding him a breakfast of finest caviar, popping it between his lips with her slim skilful fingers, while a third held a goblet of dry, crisp white wine, which she proffered whenever he turned away from the caviar. A fourth girl strummed on a stringed instrument that Norman had learnt, on enquiry, to be a dulcimer, and sang melodiously in the background.

This certainly beat yomping aimlessly round the woods with nothing to eat and monsters leaping out of the trees at you. He hadn’t eaten so well since that banquet in Lord Rutabaga’s manor house. Things were definitely looking up. But did they really deserve this treatment?

The women led him from the bath and began to towel him down while the other girl sang on in the corner. Okay, they’d killed the evil wizard. Well, they’d sort of finished him off. They certainly hadn’t killed him in mortal combat, not like Percy had done with the other sorcerer. They’d run after him until he had a heart attack and died.

Norman couldn’t believe that the old man had really been a wizard. He’d met wizards. Well, there’d been Neelex, who seemed to have been a bit of a fraud, and then there’d been that guy in the house the other day, the one with the animated statues that had pursued them even when he was dead. The old guy, though, he’d just been a lonely old man who lived in the woods. Back on Earth, he’d be looked after, he’d be in care. Sheltered accommodation. Not living in a cave all alone with griffins for friends.

The women led him into another room, hung with drapes and tapestries and lit like the first by a large glowing gem in the ceiling. Here they dressed him in silken robes and urged him to

lie on a couch while they prepared more food. He was finding all this hospitality a bit cloying, really. And he didn't think he deserved it.

These people seemed to think that the old man had stolen their babies and cursed their crops. Didn't seem likely. Why would he want to do that, even assuming he was able to? Norman reckoned these people were just superstitious peasants basically, and they'd blamed the old guy for anything that went wrong just because he was a bit odd and lived on his own. They'd probably have burnt him for witchcraft if they'd got a chance.

As Norman began eating, Gerald strolled in nonchalantly, wearing a kind of kimono, and smiled at the women. Norman wished they'd go away.

'Hi, Gerald,' he greeted him, looking feebly at his attendants.

Gerald clapped his hands and pointed to the door. As one, the women gracefully rose and left the room.

'Haven't you worked out how to deal with them yet?' he asked, strolling over and flinging himself down on another couch. 'They're just slave girls. You can do what you like. They don't have any say.'

Norman nodded unenthusiastically. He wasn't very happy about that. 'I don't think this is right,' he blurted out. Gerald listened with a patronizing smile on his face as Norman told him his thoughts, then he lay back and stretched luxuriously.

'He was an evil wizard, Norman,' he said. 'And we killed him. These people are grateful.' He rose on one elbow. 'We're heroes, for fuck's sake! Enjoy it.'

Norman sighed. He'd always wanted to be a hero and now he was one. He'd been a bit of a hero to the strolling players, of course, but only because they'd got the crazy idea he was a master thief. But now another group of people had got the wrong end of the stick.

'Dool popped by to say that Mayor Gall has invited us to another banquet tonight,' Gerald added.

'Another one?' Norman groaned. He was going to get fat at this rate.

'Apparently there's a guy from out of town who wants to meet some heroes,' Gerald said. 'We've got a reputation.'

'Oh,' said Norman. So now they were celebrities, were they? Another thought too worrying to conjure with. 'Where are the others?' he added.

'Brian and Percy have gone for a stroll,' said Gerald. 'These people are really good to us, you know. And the slave girls they've given me! Hey, they could teach Dozy Rosie a thing or two.' Dozy Rosie was a girl Gerald had dated back on Earth. Not a nice girl; Norman had met her once and he'd spent the whole time blushing scarlet at her profanity and unable to speak. 'You shagged any of your ones yet?' Gerald added, sniggering, leaning forward. 'Do they give head?'

Norman found himself blushing furiously again. ‘I don’t think I should kiss and tell...’ His discomfort made him nasty. ‘Anyway, what about Immiel?’

Gerald looked away, his face stony. Abruptly, he rose and stormed out.

That night, in the banqueting chamber of the town hall, Mayor Gall spoke at flowery length about their daring and heroism before introducing a man about his age, a medium sized, stocky, bearded fellow with a haunted expression.

‘This is Tito the Taverner, keeper of the Hostelry of the Four Ravens on the road to the Mountain Duchies,’ Gall said, and they all greeted him politely. He took his place next to Norman.

They were all sitting at the high table, on either side of the mayor and his handsome wife. Like his friends, Norman wore a crushed velvet doublet and linen hose, with a dress sword at his belt. He listened with embarrassment as a harper sang a ballad that grossly embellished their exploits. Tito listened open-mouthed. When the song was over, the taverner said, ‘No wonder the people of Wishbone Village have treated you with such honour! The killers of the evil wizard Sator!’

‘Yes, well, I don’t really think we deserve it...’ Norman began.

‘Modest, too,’ said Tito admiringly. ‘You have all the traits of a hero. And that’s what I’m looking for. Only heroes could rescue me from my torment.’

At that, Mayor Gall turned to them, and said in a booming voice, ‘Tell our heroes of your plight, Tito. They will be glad to aid you in any way they can, I know it!’

Tito was about to reply when Dool came hurrying in through the main doors, closing them carefully behind them. He came up to the mayor and leant forward. ‘Did you order a consignment of statuary, your worship?’

Gall looked at him as if this was some kind of bizarre joke. ‘Statuary?’

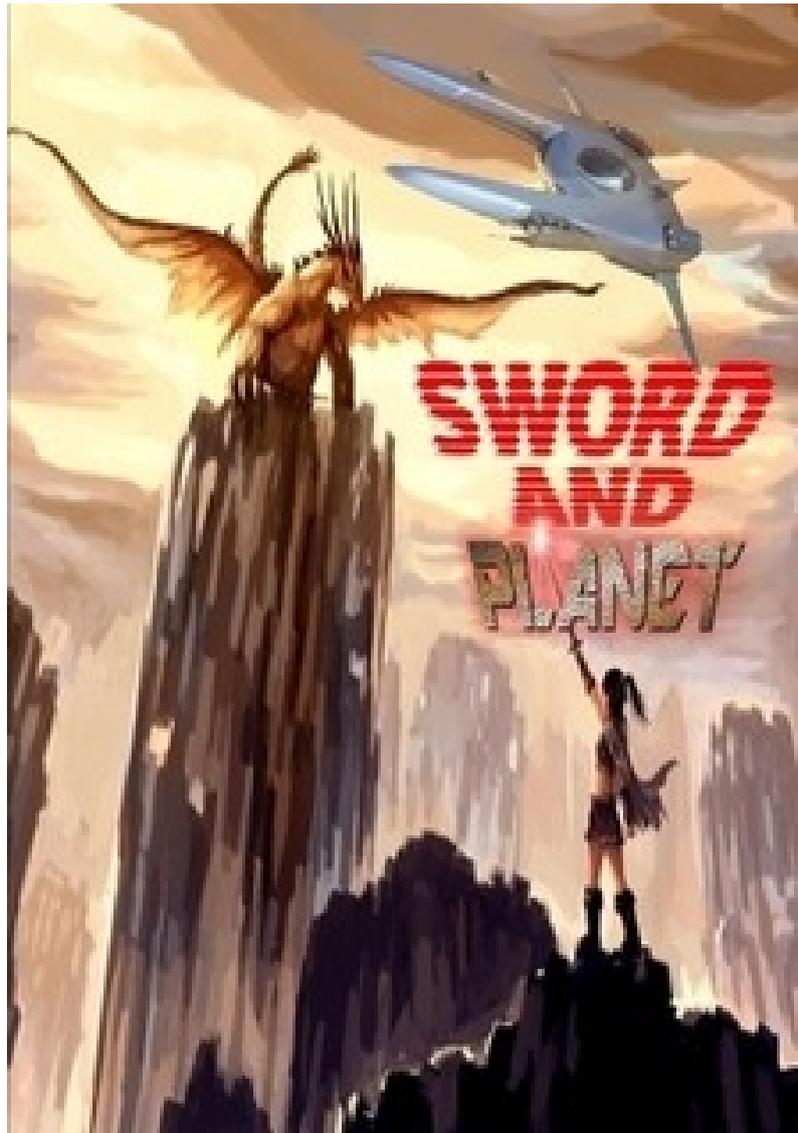
‘Three statues outside the hall,’ said Dool. ‘Just standing there. No one with them. They look antique...’

Norman’s blood ran cold. Before he could speak, the doors burst open and three statues marched into the hall. Each one was smeared in dried mud. All were missing limbs. One missed a head. Despite this, they were instantly recognizable to Norman.

The animated statues had found them.

THE END

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[Return to Contents](#)

THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO by Gregory KH Bryant

Episode Seventeen

Colonel Bridgemont had his hands full. Dogfights were raging immediately over Callisto Base 1 while at the same time, Scroungers were attacking the bases on Europa and Ganymede. Even now, warnings came in through his scanner that the dome above Callisto Base 1 had been damaged. Air was escaping rapidly from an entire pod. The maps shined with bright red lines, showing the location of the damage.

“Walls are coming down, sir,” he heard from one of his adjutants.

“Any civilians in there?”

“Can’t tell, sir. We can only hope they’ve evacuated to the basements.”

“Send a repair crew to the damaged area. Team of three. No more. We can’t spare them.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Reports from Europa, sir.”

“Whadda we got?”

“The hostiles have cracked the airlocks at Clarke Base 2. It’s street fighting there, sir.”

“Damn.”

“Can we send them support, sir?”

Bridgemont shook his head.

“No. We need every man and woman right here on Callisto.”

Loud booms rattled the command centre. The walls shook.

“... the hell?” Bridgemont demanded.

“One of their ships... the hostiles, sir. Took a hit and landed hard.”

“Good. Thank God the “Bellerophon” is here.”

Combat in deep space is a fundamentally different thing from fighting close to a planetary surface. In deep space, attacks can come from every possible direction. Close to a planetary surface, the body of the planet serves as a barrier of sorts. The gravity of the planetary body also plays a significant part in combat flying—here there is an ‘up’ and a ‘down’ that gunners and pilots must take into account.

Lieutenant Hardy and his fighters were proficient in both deep space and near-planetary combat. They had trained on simulators, earning their stripes, and were proficient in fighting, not only in the Earth-Mars environments, but also many of the asteroids, and all the moons of the Jovian system.

Which gave them yet another advantage over the Scroungers, who had no access to the simulators used for training by the Earth Space Forces.

And that training came in very useful to Hardy and his fighters now.

As the large pieces of the greenhouse came tumbling toward the domes of Callisto Base 1, Hardy's fighters were able to hit many of them with their pulse cannons, shattering them. The smaller pieces bounced harmlessly off the transparent steel of the domes.

When the "Bellerophon" dropped below the horizon of Callisto, Hardy saw the present Colonel Westland left behind for the Scroungers, the hundred mines that assembled themselves into a deadly formation above Callisto Base 1.

"Watch your step, boys and girls," Hardy commanded the fighters in his squadron. "We got a ceiling. Keep it tight."

The battle was between the surface of Callisto below and the mine field above. Hardy grinned. He and his fighters had an easy playing field for themselves, having trained for exactly this environment many times over. Now the trick was to lead or goad the Scroungers into the field of mines, mines that would cause the muscles of the Scroungers' bodies to convulse in a series of spasms, resulting in massive heart attacks.

Hardy's ship and his fighters' ships were shielded against the mines. They could fly through the field with impunity. The Scroungers? Not so likely.

Hardy had twelve fighter ships with him, and he found his force confronting a fleet of twice that number. He was glad for any advantage that came his way.

"Bring 'em on up, boys and girls," he commanded on subspace.

"Follow my signal!"

He brought the nose of his ship upward, nearly perpendicular to the surface of Callisto. Instantly, he plunged into the field of pulse mines. His fighters came together in a daggerlike formation and followed.

Turhan Mot's fighters, seeing a trap, did not follow. They scrupulously avoided the mine field, flying below it and around, to attack Hardy's fighters again. They broke up into four groups, each group flying in one of four directions. As they emerged from under the field of mines, they looped upward and then back downward upon Hardy's task force, firing their pulse cannons.

In the four seconds it took Turhan Mot's fighters to accomplish this manoeuvre, Hardy's fighters were able to duck back into the mine field and train the cannons in a concerted barrage of pulses at the mines.

Several dozen mines were sent careening toward the Scroungers' small, fleet ships. Many of the mines made contact with several of those ships, killing the crews instantly. The ships, suddenly without control, spun downward, into the frozen Callistoan desert.

The battle raged, at four thousand miles an hour, and spanning distances of hundreds of miles over the bleak plains of Callisto.

Even after having met the man, Turhan Mot yet failed to anticipate the mad rage that was Carter Ward. And this was Turhan Mot's signal failure, not only as a leader, but even as a man. For, fully absorbed with his own self, and his own appetites, it never once occurred to the man that others may not share his own lusts, his own greed, his own failings.

People should fear him, and the terror he inflicted, just as he himself would be terrorized. People should crave life, and living, and satisfying their own appetites to the exclusion of all else, just as Turhan Mot did.

That there could be a man such as Carter Ward, a man who was pathologically incapable of fear, just as he, Turhan Mot, was incapable of remorse, never once occurred to the man. He, Turhan Mot, was a fearful thing, both in appearance and in deed, and all who met him should only cower or flee before him.

Not Ward. Ward felt no fear of Turhan Mot, or his minions, or of death itself. What Carter Ward did feel was rage, a smouldering rage that he constantly stifled, until those moments came, when his lifelong rage came in handy.

As it was now. Turhan Mot expected no single small ship to attack the "Grand Marquis". He had, therefore, no response ready when Ward drove the O8-111A directly through the plasma wall of his ship, and into the landing deck within.

Mud followed close behind, in his ship, the "Charon". Somewhat larger than the O8-111A, Mud's ship was also decked out with many of the latest toys from Deimos Labs, droll weapons unavailable to the Scroungers. Yet, between the two of them, Ward's ship carried the newest and most deadly armament.

They burst through the shimmering plasma walls, firing their pulse cannons at the scrambling flight crews. Arms, legs, feet, hands and heads were twisted off from their bodies, and sent splattering throughout the flight deck.

The flight deck was weightless, and the littered body parts wrought huge confusion among the flight crews. They were armed only with laser pistols, useless against the reinforced bulkheads of the O8-111A and the Charon.

Ward brought his ship to a halt, and handed control over to Dimara.

"Keep her tight, babe. Kill everyone you see who isn't me. Or Mud."

Dimara had already manifested at the bridge, and watched Ward's moves with great interest.

“The Dimara shall take great joy in carrying out the commands of the Carter Ward,” she said, smiling.

“Good. I’ll be back in a bit.”

Armed only with his combat knife, equipped with electric and CO2 charges, and a plasma pistol, Ward left the bridge of his ship, and leaped out onto the landing bay of the “Grand Marquis”.

Mud, he was happy to see, had already brought the “Charon” about, and docked hard on the landing deck. Futile laser blasts danced on the deck near his feet. He laughed.

“You good?” Ward asked him.

“Never better,” Mud grinned through his thick beard. “And to think, man, we’re gonna get paid for this!”

Ward grunted. Then he gave Mud a smirk that served for a smile.

“Where to?” Mud asked. “It’s your party.”

“The bridge,” Ward said. “I’m after Mokem Bet, and I’m guessing we’ll find him there.”

“Lead the way!” Mud answered. He, like Carter Ward was armed with a combat knife as well as a laser pistol. He also brought along a half dozen explosive grenades, and a few other small devices he liked to call his ‘party favours’.

The landing bay of the “Grand Marquis” was brightly lit, with yet another dozen ships in docks, waiting orders to launch. Ward ignored them, and the many flight crews that scrambled to offer a confused resistance to him and Mud. Not knowing whether more ships were coming—a very likely possibility, given the absurdity of Ward’s attack—they clustered behind any shelter they could find, firing their pistols at the two men.

Ward pushed himself away from the O8-111A with Mud following close behind. Dimara, inside, trained the ship’s guns at the flight crews firing at Ward while directing a barrage at the fighter ships still docked.

The confusion she wrought upon the landing bay was more than sufficient cover for Ward and Mud. They hurtled themselves weightlessly toward the nose of the ship, coming to a large hatch that led further forward.

It was bolted shut.

“This the only way?” Mud asked.

Ward shrugged, which was his silent way of saying, ‘Hell if I know’.

Mud grinned.

“Here’s a little something I brought,” he said, pulling a plastic sheet from his jump suit. He slapped it against the hatch, causing it to stick.

“You might wanna give yourself some space,” he said.

Ward nodded, pushing himself away from the hatch.

Mud followed him.

The launch bay had grown silent. Dimara had most effectively ended the lives of everything that breathed upon it, with the sole exception of Ward and Mud.

When they had moved a good thirty feet away from the hatch, Mud drew his laser pistol, setting it to ‘Burn’. A single nearly silent flash sent a red beam from his pistol to the patch of plastic he had affixed to the forward hatch.

The beam touched the plastic patch lightly, and the patch exploded in a ball of flame and shattered metal. Tiny shards of twisted steel corkscrewed through the air, slashing razor cuts against Ward and Mud, their faces, their hands and their arms.

Mud laughed.

“Man, I never get tired of that shit!”

Where moments before the hatch leading to the forward sections of the “Grand Marquis” presented a nearly impassable barrier, there was now only a gaping hole fringed with sputtering, sparking wires, and the fragments of bodies of uncountable crewmen.

Ward and Mud launched themselves directly at the huge, smouldering hole, and through it.

They came to a long, narrow and curving hall, and found themselves confronted by several dazed but yet deadly Scroungers, heads shaved and tattoos obscuring their faces. The Scroungers threw themselves upon the two men, grappling hard to wrestle their arms behind them and to capture them.

Both Ward and Mud understood the significance of the manoeuvre. Clearly, the Scroungers meant to capture, not kill, these two. Which gave Ward and Mud an advantage. Unencumbered by the restraint imposed upon the Scroungers by Turhan Mot’s orders, Mud and Ward found themselves in a fight where the difference in goals redounded most decidedly in their own favour.

Wrestling in a weightless environment, too, is a most confounding thing, even for those experienced at it. Which, as it happened, Mud and Ward were. Part of their training with the Martian Rangers, oh so many years before.

Armed with their combat knives, Ward and Mud easily killed three of their opponents in the first seconds of the fight. A six-inch blade, wielded by Mud, thrust upward under the jaw and into the brain of one Scrounger, caused his instant and merciful, death.

The two who grappled with Ward were not so lucky.

He plunged his blade into the belly of the man who came closest to him, and pressed the button on the handle of his knife that released a CO2 charge into the man's stomach. Pulling the blade back out, as his first opponent's abdomen began to swell to absurd and shocking proportions, Ward brought his bloodied blade down hard and through the wrist of the second Scrounger who tried to grasp his arm and flip him.

The blade stuck in the bones of the man's wrist.

"Dammit," Ward grunted.

He placed his foot on the Scrounger's chest, and began to yank his blade out. In this weightless environment, the two contorted themselves in an almost obscene dance of flesh, sweat and blood. They spun wildly as the Scrounger, on his part, no stranger to pain himself, reached out with his free hand, trying to drive his fingers into Ward's eyes.

They piled hard against a bulkhead, knocking the wind from them both.

Mud, for his part, had made quick work of the three others who yet challenged them. Using the corpse of his first kill, the man's skull still impaled upon Mud's knife, as a bludgeon, he swung it in a wide arc that sent two of them sprawling, smashing their faces against bulkhead and deck. As they attempted to pull themselves together and face Mud again, he was already upon them with his laser pistol. Two quick shots, and they were blinded. The odour of burning flesh was thick in the narrow hall. Mud chose not to kill them. Better to leave them alive, a burden on Turhan Mot.

Mud turned to see how Ward was faring. Still, he and his opponent were grappling with each other, while struggling for breath. Ward's face was turning blue, with the Scrounger's brawny fingers clenched tightly around his throat. Ward, for his part, and unable to bring his knife into play, was smashing his fist into the Scrounger's face, shattering his nose and jaw, yet still unable to break the man's grip on his throat.

Mud hurtled himself at the two men clenched so tightly together. A single thrust of his blade into the man's armpit was all it took to cause him to release Ward's throat, in a splattering cascade of blood that resolved itself into a stream of shimmering globules that bounded through the hall.

The Scrounger grunted. Mud grabbed the man by the tail of hair that grew from his head, forcing his head upward. Before Ward had a chance to crawl away, Mud cut the Scrounger's throat, unleashing another torrent of blood that splattered Ward's face and chest.

"Where to now?" Mud asked. "Any idea?"

Ward wiped the blood from his face with the sleeve of his jumpsuit. He glared at his friend, who simply grinned a big toothy smile through his thick blood-clotted beard.

"Let's see where this takes us, huh?" Ward said, gesturing down the long, curving hall.

Turhan Mot had seen all, of course, So had Mokem Bet, Tu Hit, and every other man and woman on the command deck of the “Grand Marquis”. There was not a single cubic inch of the “Grand Marquis” that was not constantly surveilled by cameras mounted throughout the ship, with the sole exception of Turhan Mot’s own private quarters. Not even Mokem Bet, his second in command, enjoyed a moment of privacy aboard the “Grand Marquis”.

And Turhan Mot was not at all pleased at what he was seeing.

“Is this it, just the two of them?” Mokem Bet hazarded to ask, after watching the slaughter in the hallway.

“These men are insane,” Turhan Mot hissed. “Insane.”

He watched them through the cameras as Ward and Mud hurried down the long hallway, checking on each hatch and portal as they passed it. Most were locked down. Once or twice they found an open portal, and just to be on the safe side, Mud tossed one of his explosive grenades through the portal without bothering to look inside.

Turhan Mot scowled. His thin purple lips twisted themselves into a contortion of barely stifled rage.

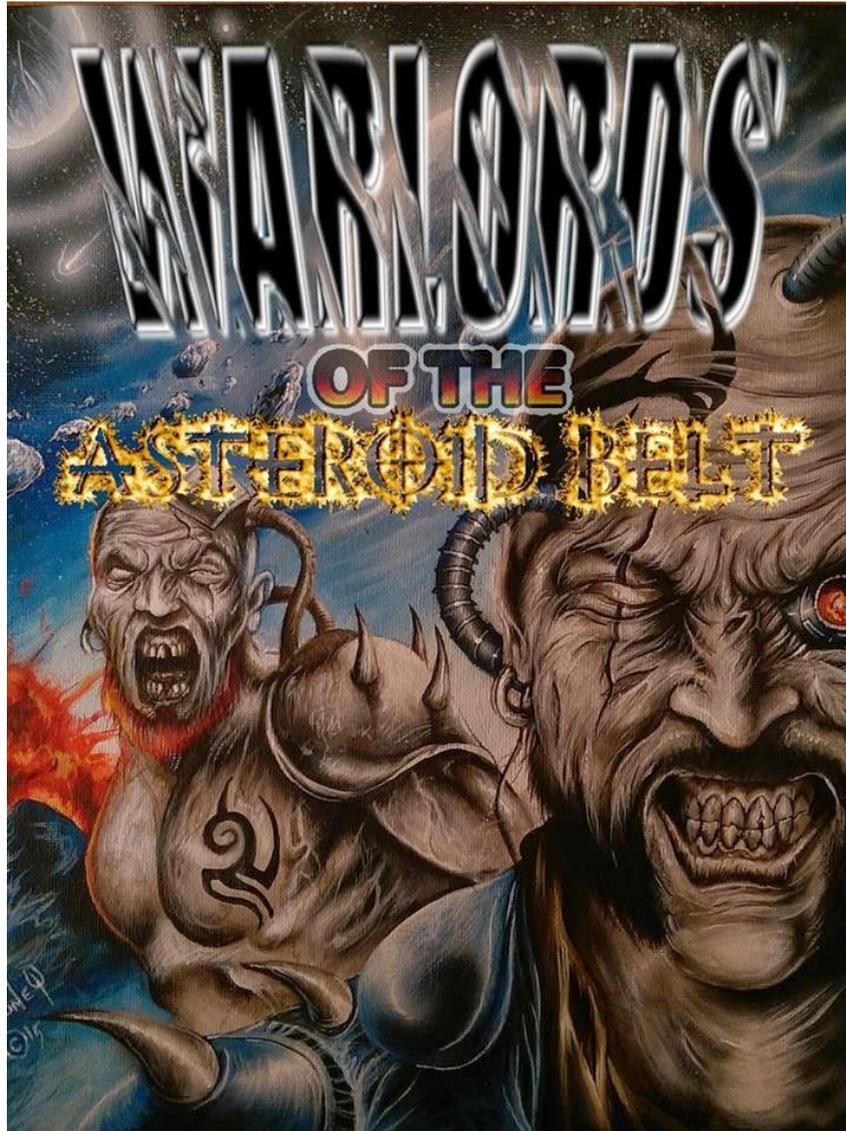
“If it is but the two of them,” he determined, at last, “Then we should find them easy enough to kill.”

He turned to Mokem Bet.

“Send orders throughout the ship. Waste no effort trying to capture these men. We shall pay no bounty on them. Kill them. Just kill them.”

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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



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[Return to Contents](#)

TALES OF THE DEAD by Johann August Apel

The Death Bride: Part Two

“They represented to Filippo the great advantages he would obtain by an alliance with her. The Carnival happening just at this period completed the business, by affording him so many favourable opportunities of being with Camilla; and in the end, the remembrance of Leghorn held but very little place in his mind. His letters became colder and colder each succeeding day; and on Clara expressing how sensibly she felt the change, he ceased writing to her altogether, and did everything in his power to hasten his union with Camilla, who was, without compare, much the handsomer and more wealthy. The agonies poor Clara endured were manifest in her illegible writing, and by the tears which were but too evidently shed over her letters: but neither the one nor the other had any more influence over the fickle heart of Filippo, than the prayers of the unfortunate girl. Even the menace of coming, according to their solemn agreement, from the tomb to haunt him, and carry him with her to that grave which threatened so soon to enclose her, had but little effect on his mind, which was entirely engrossed by the idea of the happiness he should enjoy in the arms of Camilla.

“The father of the latter (who was my intimate friend) invited me before-hand to the wedding. And although numerous affairs detained him that summer in the city, so that he could not as usual enjoy the pleasures of the country, yet we sometimes went to his pretty villa, situated on the banks of the Brenta; where his daughter’s marriage was to be celebrated with all possible splendour.

“A particular circumstance, however, occasioned the ceremony to be deferred for some weeks. The parents of Camilla having been very happy in their own union, were anxious that the same priest who married them, should pronounce the nuptial benediction on their daughter. This priest, who, notwithstanding his great age, had the appearance of vigorous health, was seized with a slow fever which confined him to his bed: however, in time it abated, he became gradually better and better, and the wedding-day was at length fixed. But, as if some secret power was at work to prevent this union, the worthy priest was, on the very day destined for the celebration of their marriage, seized with a feverish shivering of so alarming a nature, that he dared not stir out of the house, and he strongly advised the young couple to select another priest to marry them.

“The parents still persisted in their design of the nuptial benediction being given to their children by the respectable old man who had married them. —They would have certainly spared themselves a great deal of grief, if they had never swerved from their determination. —Very grand preparations had been made in honour of the day; and as they could no longer be deferred, it was decided that they should consider it as a ceremony of solemn affiance. At noon the bargemen attired in their splendid garb awaited the company’s arrival on the banks of the canal: their joyous song was soon distinguished, while conducting to the villa, now decorated with flowers, the numerous gondolas containing parties of the best company.

“During the dinner, which lasted till evening, the betrothed couple exchanged rings. At the very moment of their so doing, a piercing shriek was heard, which struck terror into the breasts of all the company, and absolutely struck Filippo with horror. Everyone ran to the windows: for although it was becoming dark, each object was visible; but no one was to be seen.”

“Stop an instant,” said the duke to me, with a fierce smile—His countenance, which had frequently changed colour during the recital, evinced strong marks of the torments of a wicked conscience. “I am also acquainted with that story of a voice being heard in the air; it is borrowed from the ‘Memoirs of Mademoiselle Clairon;’ a deceased lover tormented her in this completely original manner. The shriek in her case was followed by a clapping of hands: I hope, monsieur le marquis, that you will not omit that particular in your story.”

“And why,” replied I, “should you imagine that nothing of a similar nature could occur to any one besides that actress? Your incredulity appears to me so much the more extraordinary, as it seems to rest on facts which may lay claim to belief.”

The countess made me a sign to continue; and pursued my narrative as follows:

“A short time after they had heard this inexplicable shriek, I begged Camilla, facing whom I was sitting, to permit me to look at her ring once more, the exquisite workmanship of which had already been much admired. But it was not on her finger: a general search was made, but not the slightest trace of the ring could be discovered. The company even rose from their seats to look for it, but all in vain.

“Meanwhile, the time for the evening’s amusements approached: fire-works were exhibited on the Brenta preceding the ball; the company were masked and got into the gondolas; but nothing was so striking as the silence which reigned during this fête; no one seemed inclined to open their mouth; and scarcely was heard a faint exclamation of Bravo, at sight of the fire-works.

“The ball was one of the most brilliant I ever witnessed: the precious stones and jewels with which the ladies of the party were covered, reflected the lights in the chandeliers with redoubled lustre. The most splendidly attired of the whole was Camilla. Her father, who was fond of pomp, rejoiced in the idea that no one in the assembly was equal to his daughter in splendour or beauty.

“Possibly to satisfy himself of this fact, he made a tour of the room; and returned loudly expressing his surprise at having perceived on another lady precisely the same jewels which adorned Camilla. He was even weak enough to express a slight degree of chagrin. However, he consoled himself with the idea, that a bouquet of diamonds which was destined for Camilla to wear at supper, would alone in value be greater than all she then had on.

“But as they were on the point of sitting down to table, and the anxious father again threw a look around him, he discovered that the same lady had also a bouquet which appeared to the full as valuable as Camilla’s.

“My friend’s curiosity could no longer be restrained; he approached, and asked whether it would be too great a liberty to learn the name of the fair mask? But to his great surprise, the lady shook her head, and turned away from him.

“At the same instant the steward came in, to ask whether since dinner there had been any addition to the party, as the covers were not sufficient.

“His master answered, with rather a dissatisfied air, that there were only the same number, and accused his servants of negligence; but the steward still persisted in what he had said.

“An additional cover was placed: the master counted them himself, and discovered that there really was one more in number than he had invited. As he had recently, on account of some inconsiderate expressions, had a dispute with government, he was apprehensive that some spy had contrived to slip in with the company: but as he had no reason to believe, that on such a day as that, anything of a suspicious nature would be uttered, he resolved, in order to be satisfied respecting so indiscreet a procedure as the introduction of such a person in a family fête, to beg every one present to unmask; but in order to avoid the inconvenience likely to arise from such a request, he determined not to propose it till the very last thing.

“Everyone present expressed their surprise at the luxuries and delicacies of the table, for it far surpassed everything of the sort seen in that country, especially with respect to the wines. Still, however, the father of Camilla was not satisfied, and loudly lamented that an accident had happened to his capital red champagne, which prevented his being able to offer his guests a single glass of it.

“The company seemed anxious to become gay, for the whole of the day nothing like gaiety had been visible among them; but no one around where I sat, partook of this inclination, for curiosity alone appeared to occupy their whole attention. I was sitting near the lady who was so splendidly attired; and I remarked that she neither ate nor drank anything; that she neither addressed nor answered a word to her neighbours, and that she appeared to have her eyes constantly fixed on the affianced couple.

“The rumour of this singularity gradually spread round the room, and again disturbed the mirth which had become pretty general. Each whispered to the other a thousand conjectures on this mysterious personage. But the general opinion was, that some unhappy passion for Filippo was the cause of this extraordinary conduct. Those sitting next the unknown, were the first to rise from table, in order to find more cheerful associates, and their places were filled by others who hoped to discover some acquaintance in this silent lady, and obtain from her a more welcome reception; but their hopes were equally futile.

“At the time the champagne was handed round, Filippo also brought a chair and sat by the unknown. She then became somewhat more animated, and turned towards Filippo, which was more than she had done to anyone else; and she offered him her glass, as if wishing him to drink out of it.

“A violent trembling seized Filippo, when she looked at him steadfastly.

“‘The wine is red!’ cried he, holding up the glass; ‘I thought there had been no red champagne.’

“‘Red!’ said the father of Camilla, with an air of extreme surprise, approaching him from curiosity.

“‘Look at the lady’s glass,’ replied Filippo.

“‘The wine in it is as white as all the rest,’ answered Camilla’s father; and he called all present to witness it. They everyone unanimously declared that the wine was white.

“Filippo drank it not, but quitted his seat; for a second look from his neighbour had caused him extreme agitation. He took the father of Camilla aside, and whispered something to him. The latter returned to the company, saying,

“Ladies and gentlemen, I entreat you, for reasons which I will tell you presently, instantly to unmask.’

“As in this request he but expressed in a degree the general wish, every one’s mask was off as quick as thought, and each face uncovered, excepting that of the silent lady, on whom every look was fixed, and whose face they were the most anxious to see.

“You alone keep on your mask,’ said Camilla’s father to her, after a short silence: ‘May I hope you will also remove yours?’

“She obstinately persisted in her determination of remaining unknown.

“This strange conduct affected the father of Camilla the more sensibly, as he recognised in the others all those whom he had invited to the fête, and found beyond doubt that the mute lady was the one exceeding the number invited. He was, however, unwilling to force her to unmask; because the uncommon splendour of her dress did not permit him any longer to harbour the idea that this additional guest was a spy; and thinking her also a person of distinction, he did not wish to be deficient in good manners. He thought possibly she might be some friend of the family, who, not residing at Venice, but finding on her arrival in that city that he was to give this fête, had conceived this innocent frolic.

“It was thought right, however, at all events to obtain all the information that could be gained from the servants: but none of them knew anything, of this lady; there were no servants of hers there; and those belonging to Camilla’s father did not recollect having seen any who appeared to appertain to her.

“What rendered this circumstance doubly strange was, that, as I before mentioned, this lady only put the magnificent bouquet into her bosom the instant previous to her sitting down to supper.

“The whispering, which had generally usurped the place of all conversation, gained each moment more and more ascendancy; when on a sudden the masked lady arose, and walking towards the door, beckoned Filippo to follow her; but Camilla hindered him from obeying her signal, for she had a long time observed with what fixed attention the mysterious lady looked at her intended husband; and she had also remarked, that the latter had quitted the stranger in violent agitation; and from all this she apprehended that love had caused him to be guilty of some folly or other. The master of the house, turning a deaf ear to all his daughter’s remonstrances, and a prey to the most terrible fears, followed the unknown (at a distance, it is true); but she was no sooner out of the room than he returned. At this moment, the shriek which they had heard at noon was repeated, but seemed louder from the silence of night, and communicated anew affright to all present. By the time the father of Camilla had returned from the first movement which his fear had occasioned him to make, the unknown was nowhere to be found.

“The servants in waiting outside the house had no knowledge whatever of the masked lady. In every direction around there were crowds of persons; the river was lined with gondolas; and yet not an individual among them had seen the mysterious female.

“All these circumstances had occasioned so much uneasiness to the whole party, that everyone was anxious to return home; and the master of the house was obliged to permit the departure of the gondolas much earlier than he had intended.

“The return home was, as might naturally be expected, very melancholy.

“On the following day the betrothed couple were, however, pretty composed. Filippo had even adopted Camilla’s idea of the unknown being someone whom love had deprived of reason; and as for the horrible shriek twice repeated, they were willing to attribute it to some people who were diverting themselves; and they decided, that inattention on the part of the servants was the sole cause of the unknown absenting herself without being perceived; and they even at last persuaded themselves, that the sudden disappearance of the ring, which they had not been able to find, was owing to the malice of some one of the servants who had pilfered it.

“In a word, they banished everything that could tend to weaken these explanations; and only one thing remained to harass them. The old priest, who was to bestow on them the nuptial benediction, had yielded up his last breath; and the friendship which had so intimately subsisted between him and the parents of Camilla, did not permit them in decency to think of marriage and amusements the week following his death.

“The day this venerable priest was buried, Filippo’s gaiety received a severe shock; for he learned, in a letter from Clara’s mother, the death of that lovely girl. Sinking under the grief occasioned her by the infidelity of the man she had never ceased to love, she died: but to her latest hour she declared she should never rest quietly in her grave, until the perjured man had fulfilled the promise he had made to her.

“This circumstance produced a stronger effect on him than all the imprecations of the unhappy mother; for he recollected that the first shriek (the cause of which they had never been able to ascertain) was heard at the precise moment of Clara’s death; which convinced him that the unknown mask could only have been the spirit of Clara.

“This idea deprived him at intervals of his senses.

“He constantly carried this letter about him; and with an air of wandering would sometimes draw it from his pocket, in order to reconsider it attentively: even Camilla’s presence did not deter him.

“As it was natural to conclude this letter contained the cause of the extraordinary change which had taken place in Filippo, she one day gladly seized the opportunity of reading it, when in one of his absent fits he let it fall from his hands.

“Filippo, struck by the death-like paleness and faintness which overcame Camilla, as she returned him the letter, knew instantly that she had read it. In the deepest affliction he threw himself at her feet, and conjured her to tell him how he must act.

“Love me with greater constancy than you did her,”—replied Camilla mournfully.

“With transport he promised to do so. But his agitation became greater and greater, and increased to a most extraordinary pitch the morning of the day fixed for the wedding. As he was going to the house of Camilla’s father before it became dark, (from whence he was to take his bride at dawn of day to the church, according to the custom of the country,) he fancied he saw Clara’s spirit walking constantly at his side.

“Never was seen a couple about to receive the nuptial benediction, with so mournful an aspect. I accompanied the parents of Camilla, who had requested me to be a witness: and the sequel has made an indelible impression on my mind of the events of that dismal morning.

“We were proceeding silently to the church of the Salutation; when Filippo, in our way thither, frequently requested me to remove the stranger from Camilla’s side, for she had evil designs against her.

“What stranger?” I asked him.

“In God’s name, don’t speak so loud,” replied he; “for you cannot but see how anxious she is to force herself between Camilla and me.”

“Mere chimera, my friend; there are none but yourself and Camilla.”

“Would to Heaven my eyes did not deceive me!”—“Take care that she does not enter the church,” added he, as we arrived at the door.

“She will not enter it, rest assured,” said I: and to the great astonishment of Camilla’s parents I made a motion as if to drive someone away.

“We found Filippo’s father already in the church; and as soon as his son perceived him, he took leave of him as if he was going to die. Camilla sobbed; and Filippo exclaimed:—

“There’s the stranger; she has then got in.”

“The parents of Camilla doubted whether under such circumstances the marriage ceremony ought to be begun.

“But Camilla, entirely devoted to her love, cried:— ‘These chimeras of fancy render my care and attention the more necessary.’

“They approached the altar. At that moment a sudden gust of wind blew out the wax-tapers. The priest appeared displeased at their not having shut the windows more securely; but Filippo exclaimed: ‘The windows! See you not, then, that there is one here who blew out the wax-tapers purposely?’

“Everyone looked astonished: and Filippo cried, as he hastily disengaged his hand from that of Camilla, — ‘Don’t you see, also, that she is tearing me away from my intended bride?’

“Camilla fell fainting into the arms of her parents; and the priest declared, that under such peculiar circumstances it was impossible to proceed with the ceremony.

“The parents of both attributed Filippo’s state to mental derangement. They even supposed he had been poisoned; for an instant after, the unfortunate man expired in most violent convulsions. The surgeons who opened his body could not, however, discover any grounds for this suspicion.

“The parents, who as well as myself were informed by Camilla of the subject of these supposed horrors of Filippo, did everything in their power to conceal this adventure: yet, on talking over all the circumstances, they could never satisfactorily explain the apparition of the mysterious mask at the time of the wedding fête. And what still appeared very surprising was, that the ring lost at the country villa was found amongst Camilla’s other jewels, at the time of their return from church.”

“‘This is, indeed, a wonderful history!’ said the count. His wife uttered a deep sigh: and Ida exclaimed, —

“‘It has really made me shudder.’

“‘That is precisely what every betrothed person ought to feel who listens to such recitals,’ answered I, looking steadfastly at the duke, who, while I was talking, had risen and sat down again several times; and who, from his troubled look, plainly shewed that he feared I should counteract his wishes.

“‘A word with you!’ he whispered me, as we were retiring to rest: and he accompanied me to my room. ‘I plainly perceive your generous intentions; this history invented for the occasion—’

“‘Hold!’ said I to him in an irritated tone of voice: ‘I was eye-witness to what you have just heard. How then can you doubt its authenticity, without accusing a man of honour of uttering a falsehood?’

“‘We will talk on this subject presently,’ replied he in a tone of raillery. ‘But tell me truly from whence you learnt the anecdote relative to mixing the blood with wine? —I know the person from whose life you borrowed this idea.’

“‘I do assure you that I have taken it from no one’s life but Filippo’s; and yet there may be similar stories—as of the shriek, for instance. But even this singular manner of irrevocably affiancing themselves may have presented itself to any two lovers.’

“‘Perhaps so! Yet one could trace in your narration many traits resembling another history.’

“‘That is very possible: all love-stories are founded on the same stock, and cannot deny their parentage.’

“‘No matter,’ replied Marino; ‘but I desire that from henceforth you do not permit yourself to make any allusion to my past life; and still less that you relate certain anecdotes to the count. On these conditions, and only on these conditions, do I pardon your former very ingenious fiction.’

“Conditions! —forgiveness! —And do you dare thus to talk to me? —This is rather too much. Now take my answer: To-morrow morning the count shall know that you have been already affianced, and what you now exact.’

“Marquis, if you dare—’

“Oh! oh! —yes, I dare do it; and I owe it to an old friend. The impostor who dares accuse me of falsehood shall no longer wear his deceitful mask in this house.’

“Passion had, spite of my endeavours, carried me so far, that a duel became inevitable. The duke challenged me. And we agreed, at parting, to meet the following morning in a neighbouring wood with pistols.

“In effect, before day-light we each took our servant and went into the forest. Marino, remarking that I had not given any orders in case of my being killed, undertook to do so for me; and accordingly he told my servant what to do with my body, as if everything was already decided. He again addressed me ere we shook hands; —

“For,’ said he, ‘the combat between us must be very unequal. I am young,’ added he; ‘but in many instances my hand has proved a steady one. I have not, it is true, absolutely killed any man; but I have invariably hit my adversary precisely on the part I intended. In this instance, however, I must, for the first time, kill my man, as it is the only effectual method of preventing your annoying me further; unless you will give me your word of honour not to discover any occurrences of my past life to the count, in which case I consent to consider the affair as terminated here.’

“As you may naturally believe, I rejected his proposition.

“As it must be so,’ replied he, ‘recommend your soul to God.’ We prepared accordingly.

“It is your first fire,’ he said to me.

“I yield it to you,’ answered I.

“He refused to fire first. I then drew the trigger, and caused the pistol to drop from his hand. He appeared surprised: but his astonishment was great indeed, when, after taking up another pistol, he found he had missed me. He pretended to have aimed at my heart; and had not even the possibility of an excuse; for he could not but acknowledge that no sensation of fear on my part had induced me to move, and baulk his aim.

“At his request I fired a second time; and again aimed at his pistol which he held in his left hand: and to his great astonishment it dropped also; but the ball had passed so near his hand, that it was a good deal bruised.

“His second fire having passed me, I told him I would not fire again; but that, as it was possible the extreme agitation of his mind had occasioned him to miss me twice, I proposed adjusting matters.

“Before he had time to refuse my offer, the count, who had suspicions that all was not right, was between us, with his daughter. He complained loudly of such conduct on the part of his

guests; and demanded some explanation on the cause of our dispute. I then developed the whole business in presence of Marino, whose evident embarrassment convinced the count and Ida of the truth of the reproaches his conscience made him.

“But the duke soon availed himself of Ida’s affection, and created an entire change in the count’s mind; who that very evening said to me, —

“You are right; I certainly ought to take some decided step, and send the duke from my house: but what could win the Apollonia whom he has abandoned, and whom he will never see again? Added to which, he is the only man for whom my daughter has ever felt a sincere attachment. Let us leave the young people to follow their own inclinations: the countess perfectly coincides in this opinion; and adds, that it would hurt her much were this handsome Venetian to be driven from our house. How many little infidelities and indiscretions are committed in the world and excused, owing to particular circumstances?”

“But it appears to me, that in the case in point, these particular circumstances are wanting,” answered I. However, finding the count persisted in his opinion, I said no more.

“The marriage took place without any interruption: but still there was very little of gaiety at the feast, which usually on these occasions is of so splendid and jocund a nature. The ball in the evening was dull; and Marino alone danced with most extraordinary glee.

“Fortunately, monsieur le marquis,” said he in my ear, quitting the dance for an instant and laughing aloud, “there are no ghosts or spirits here, as at your Venetian wedding.”

“Don’t,” I answered, putting up my finger to him, “rejoice too soon: misery is slow in its operations; and often is not perceived by us blind mortals till it treads on our heels.”

“Contrary to my intention, this conversation rendered him quite silent; and what convinced me the more strongly of the effect it had made on him, was, the redoubled vehemence with which the duke again began dancing.

“The countess in vain entreated him to be careful of his health: and all Ida’s supplications were able to obtain was, a few minutes’ rest to take breath when he could no longer go on.

“A few minutes after, I saw Ida in tears, which did not appear as if occasioned by joy; and she quitted the ball-room. I was standing as close to the door as I am to you at this moment; so that I could not for an instant doubt its being really Ida: but what appeared to me very strange was, that in a few seconds I saw her come in again with a countenance as calm as possible. I followed her, and remarked that she asked the duke to dance; and was so far from moderating his violence, that she partook of and even increased it by her own example. I also remarked, that as soon as the dance was over the duke took leave of the parents of Ida, and with her vanished through a small door leading to the nuptial apartment.

“While I was endeavouring to account in my own mind how it was possible for Ida so suddenly to change her sentiments, a conference in an under tone took place at the door of the room, between the count and his valet.

“The subject was evidently a very important one, as the greatly incensed looks of the count towards his gardener evinced, while he confirmed, as it appeared, what the valet had before said.

“I drew near the trio, and heard, that at a particular time the church organ was heard to play, and that the whole edifice had been illuminated within, until twelve o’clock, which had just struck.

“The count was very angry at their troubling him with so silly a tale, and asked why they did not sooner inform him of it. They answered, that everyone was anxious to see how it would end. The gardener added, that the old chaplain had been seen again; and the peasantry who lived near the forest, even pretended that they had seen the summit of the mountain which overhung their valley illuminated, and spirits dance around it.

“‘Very well!’ exclaimed the count with a gloomy air; ‘so all the old idle trash is resumed: the Death-Bride is also, I hope, going to play her part.’

“The valet having pushed aside the gardener, that he might not still further enrage the count, I put in my word; and said to the count, ‘You might at least listen to what they have to say, and learn what it is they pretend to have seen.’

“‘What is said about the Death-Bride?’ said I to the gardener.

“He shrugged up his shoulders.

“‘Was I not right?’ cried the count: ‘here we are then, and must listen to this ridiculous tale. All these things are treasured in the memory of these people, and constantly afford subjects and phantoms to their imaginations. —Is it permitted to ask under what form?’—

“‘Pray pardon me,’ replied the gardener; ‘but it resembled the deceased mademoiselle Hildegarde. She passed close to me in the garden, and then came into the castle.’

“‘O!’ said the count to him, ‘I beg, in future you will be a little more circumspect in your fancies, and leave my daughter to rest quietly in the tomb—’Tis well—’

“He then made a signal to his servants, who went out.

“‘Well! my dear marquis!’ said he to me.

“‘Well?’

“‘Your belief in stories will not, surely, carry you so far as to give credence to my Hildegarde’s spirit appearing?’

“‘At least it may have appeared to the gardener only—Do you recollect the adventure in the Museum at Paris?’

“‘You are right: that again was a pretty invention, which to this moment I cannot fathom. Believe me, I should sooner have refused my daughter to the duke for his having been the fabricator of so gross a story, than for his having forsaken his first love.’

“I see very plainly that we shall not easily accord on this point; for if my ready belief appears strange to you, your doubts seem to me incomprehensible.’

“The company assembled at the castle, retired by degrees; and I alone was left with the count and his lady, when Ida came to the room-door, clothed in her ball-dress, and appeared astonished at finding the company had left.

“‘What can this mean?’ demanded the countess. Her husband could not find words to express his astonishment.

“‘Where is Marino?’ exclaimed Ida.

“‘Do you ask us where he is?’ replied her mother; ‘did we not see you go out with him through that small door?’

“‘That could not be; —you mistake.’

“‘No, no; my dear child! A very short time since you were dancing with singular vehemence; and then you both went out together.’

“‘Me! my mother?’

“‘Yes, my dear Ida: how is it possible you should have forgotten all this?’

“‘I have forgotten nothing, believe me.’

“‘Where then have you been all this time?’

“‘In my sister’s chamber,’ said Ida.

“I remarked that at these words the count became somewhat pale; and his fearful eye caught mine: he however said nothing. The countess, fearing that her daughter was deceiving her, said to her in an afflicted tone of voice: —

“‘How could so singular a fancy possess you on a day like this?’

“‘I cannot account for it; and only know, that all on a sudden I felt an oppression at my heart, and fancied that all I wanted was Hildegarde. At the same time I felt a firm belief that I should find her in her room playing on her guitar; for which reason I crept thither softly.’

“‘And did you find her there?’

“‘Alas! no: but the eager desire that I felt to see her, added to the fatigue of dancing, so entirely overpowered me, that I seated myself on a chair, where I fell fast asleep.’

“‘How long since did you quit the room?’

“‘The clock in the tower struck the three-quarters past eleven just as I entered my sister’s room.’

“What does all this mean?” said the countess to her husband in a low voice: ‘she talks in a connected manner; and yet I know, that as the clock struck three-quarters past eleven, I entreated Ida on this very spot to dance more moderately.’

“And Marino?”—asked the count.

“I thought, as I before said, that I should find him here.’

“Good God!” exclaimed the mother, ‘she raves: but the duke—Where is he then?’

“What then, my good mother?” said Ida with an air of great disquiet, while leaning on the countess.

“Meanwhile the count took a wax-taper, and made a sign for me to follow him. A horrible spectacle awaited us in the bridal-chamber, whither he conducted me. We there found the duke extended on the floor. There did not appear the slightest signs of life in him; and his features were distorted in the most frightful manner.

“Imagine the extreme affliction Ida endured when she heard this recital, and found that all the resources of the medical attendants were employed in vain.

“The count and his family could not be roused from the deep consternation which threatened to overwhelm them. A short time after this event, some business of importance occasioned me to quit their castle; and certainly I was not sorry for the excuse to get away.

“But ere I left that county, I did not fail to collect in the village every possible information relative to the Death-Bride; whose history unfortunately, in passing from one mouth to another, experienced many alterations. It appeared to me, however, upon the whole, that this affianced bride lived in this district, about the fourteenth or fifteenth century. She was a young lady of noble family, and she had conducted herself with so much perfidy and ingratitude towards her lover, that he died of grief; but afterwards, when she was about to marry, he appeared to her the night of her intended wedding, and she died in consequence. And it is said, that since that time, the spirit of this unfortunate creature wanders on earth in every possible shape; particularly in that of lovely females, to render their lovers inconstant.

“As it was not permitted for her to appear in the form of any living being, she always chose amongst the dead those who the most strongly resembled them. It was for this reason she voluntarily frequented the galleries in which were hung family portraits. It is even reported that she has been seen in galleries of pictures open to public inspection. Finally, it is said, that, as a punishment for her perfidy, she will wander till she finds a man whom she will in vain endeavour to make swerve from his engagement; and it appears, they added, that as yet she had not succeeded.

“Having inquired what connection subsisted between this spirit and the old chaplain (of whom also I had heard mention), they informed me, that the fate of the last depended on the young lady, because he had assisted her in her criminal conduct. But no one was able to give me any satisfactory information concerning the voice which had called the duke by his name, nor on the meaning of the church being illuminated at night; and why the grand mass was

chanted. No one either knows how to account for the dance on the mountain's top in the forest.

"For the rest," added the marquis, "you will own, that the traditions are admirably adapted to my story, and may, to a certain degree, serve to fill up the gaps; but I am not enabled to give a more satisfactory explanation. I reserve for another time a second history of this same Death-Bride; I only heard it a few weeks since: it appears to me interesting; but it is too late to begin to-day, and indeed, even now, I fear that I have intruded too long on the leisure of the company present by my narrative."

He had just finished these words, and some of his auditors (though all thanked him for the trouble he had taken) were expressing their disbelief of the story, when a person of his acquaintance came into the room in a hurried manner, and whispered something, in his ear. Nothing could be more striking than the contrast presented by the bustling and uneasy air of the newly arrived person while speaking to the marquis, and the calm air of the latter while listening to him.

"Haste, I pray you," said the first (who appeared quite out of patience at the marquis's sang-froid): "In a few moments you will have cause to repent this delay."

"I am obliged to you for your affecting solicitude," replied the marquis; who in taking up his hat, appeared more to do, as all the rest of the party were doing, in preparing to return home, than from any anxiety of hastening away.

"You are lost," said the other, as he saw an officer enter the room at the head of a detachment of military, who inquired for the marquis. The latter instantly made himself known to him.

"You are my prisoner," said the officer. The marquis followed him, after saying Adieu with a smiling air to all the party, and begging they would not feel any anxiety concerning him.

"Not feel anxiety!" replied he whose advice he had neglected. "I must inform you, that they have discovered that the marquis has been detected in a connection with very suspicious characters; and his death-warrant may be considered as signed. I came in pity to warn him of his danger, for possibly he might then have escaped; but from his conduct since, I can scarcely imagine he is in his proper senses."

The party, who were singularly affected by this event, were conjecturing a thousand things, when the officer returned, and again asked for the marquis.

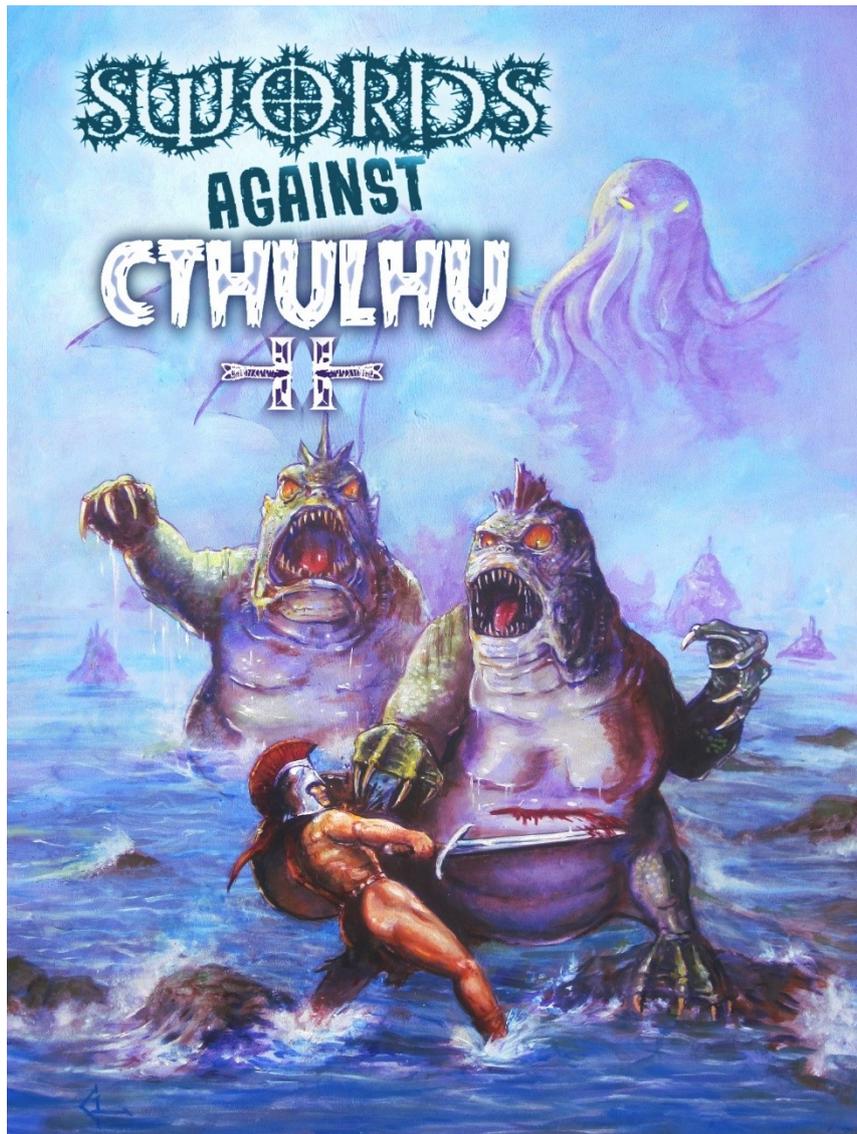
"He just now left the room with you," answered some one of the company.

"But he came in again."

"We have seen no one."

"He has then disappeared," replied the officer, smiling: he searched every corner for the marquis, but in vain. The house was thoroughly examined, but without success; and the following day the officer quitted the baths with his soldiers, without his prisoner, and very much dissatisfied.

THE END



[Return to Contents](#)

THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND by Jules Verne

Part 3. The Secret of the Island

Chapter 3

The night passed without incident. The colonists were on the qui vive, and did not leave their post at the Chimneys. The pirates, on their side, did not appear to have made any attempt to land. Since the last shots fired at Ayrton not a report, not even a sound, had betrayed the presence of the brig in the neighbourhood of the island. It might have been fancied that she had weighed anchor, thinking that she had to deal with her match, and had left the coast.

But it was no such thing, and when day began to dawn the settlers could see a confused mass through the morning mist. It was the "Speedy."

"These, my friends," said the engineer, "are the arrangements which appear to me best to make before the fog completely clears away. It hides us from the eyes of the pirates, and we can act without attracting their attention. The most important thing is, that the convicts should believe that the inhabitants of the island are numerous, and consequently capable of resisting them. I therefore propose that we divide into three parties. The first of which shall be posted at the Chimneys, the second at the mouth of the Mercy. As to the third, I think it would be best to place it on the islet, so as to prevent, or at all events delay, any attempt at landing. We have the use of two rifles and four muskets. Each of us will be armed, and, as we are amply provided with powder and shot, we need not spare our fire. We have nothing to fear from the muskets nor even from the guns of the brig. What can they do against these rocks? And, as we shall not fire from the windows of Granite House, the pirates will not think of causing irreparable damage by throwing shell against it. What is to be feared is, the necessity of meeting hand-to-hand, since the convicts have numbers on their side. We must therefore try to prevent them from landing, but without discovering ourselves. Therefore, do not economize the ammunition. Fire often, but with a sure aim. We have each eight or ten enemies to kill, and they must be killed!"

Cyrus Harding had clearly represented their situation, although he spoke in the calmest voice, as if it was a question of directing a piece of work and not ordering a battle. His companions approved these arrangements without even uttering a word. There was nothing more to be done but for each to take his place before the fog should be completely dissipated. Neb and Pencroft immediately ascended to Granite House and brought back a sufficient quantity of ammunition. Gideon Spilett and Ayrton, both very good marksmen, were armed with the two rifles, which carried nearly a mile. The four other muskets were divided among Harding, Neb, Pencroft, and Herbert.

The posts were arranged in the following manner: —

Cyrus Harding and Herbert remained in ambush at the Chimneys, thus commanding the shore to the foot of Granite House.

Gideon Spilett and Neb crouched among the rocks at the mouth of the Mercy, from which the drawbridges had been raised, so as to prevent anyone from crossing in a boat or landing on the opposite shore.

As to Ayrton and Pencroft, they shoved off in the boat, and prepared to cross the channel and to take up two separate stations on the islet. In this way, shots being fired from four different points at once, the convicts would be led to believe that the island was both largely peopled and strongly defended.

In the event of a landing being effected without their having been able to prevent it, and also if they saw that they were on the point of being cut off by the brig's boat, Ayrton and Pencroft were to return in their boat to the shore and proceed towards the threatened spot.

Before starting to occupy their posts, the colonists for the last time wrung each other's hands.

Pencroft succeeded in controlling himself sufficiently to suppress his emotion when he embraced Herbert, his boy! and then they separated.

In a few moments Harding and Herbert on one side, the reporter and Neb on the other, had disappeared behind the rocks, and five minutes later Ayrton and Pencroft, having without difficulty crossed the channel, disembarked on the islet and concealed themselves in the clefts of its eastern shore.

None of them could have been seen, for they themselves could scarcely distinguish the brig in the fog.

It was half-past six in the morning.

Soon the fog began to clear away, and the topmasts of the brig issued from the vapour. For some minutes great masses rolled over the surface of the sea, then a breeze sprang up, which rapidly dispelled the mist.

The "Speedy" now appeared in full view, with a spring on her cable, her head to the north, presenting her larboard side to the island. Just as Harding had calculated, she was not more than a mile and a quarter from the coast.

The sinister black flag floated from the peak.

The engineer, with his telescope, could see that the four guns on board were pointed at the island. They were evidently ready to fire at a moment's notice.

In the meanwhile the "Speedy" remained silent. About thirty pirates could be seen moving on the deck. A few more on the poop; two others posted in the shrouds, and armed with spyglasses, were attentively surveying the island.

Certainly, Bob Harvey and his crew would not be able easily to give an account of what had happened during the night on board the brig. Had this half-naked man, who had forced the door of the powder-magazine, and with whom they had struggled, who had six times discharged his revolver at them, who had killed one and wounded two others, escaped their shot? Had he been able to swim to shore? Whence did he come? What had been his object? Had his design really been to blow up the brig, as Bob Harvey had thought? All this must be confused enough to the convicts' minds. But what they could no longer doubt was that the unknown island before which the "Speedy" had cast anchor was inhabited, and that there was, perhaps, a numerous colony ready to defend it. And yet no one was to be seen, neither

on the shore, nor on the heights. The beach appeared to be absolutely deserted. At any rate, there was no trace of dwellings. Had the inhabitants fled into the interior? Thus probably the pirate captain reasoned, and doubtless, like a prudent man, he wished to reconnoitre the locality before he allowed his men to venture there.

During an hour and a half, no indication of attack or landing could be observed on board the brig. Evidently Bob Harvey was hesitating. Even with his strongest telescopes he could not have perceived one of the settlers crouched among the rocks. It was not even probable that his attention had been awakened by the screen of green branches and creepers hiding the windows of Granite House, and showing rather conspicuously on the bare rock. Indeed, how could he imagine that a dwelling was hollowed out, at that height, in the solid granite? From Claw Cape to the Mandible Capes, in all the extent of Union Bay, there was nothing to lead him to suppose that the island was or could be inhabited.

At eight o'clock, however, the colonists observed a movement on board the "Speedy." A boat was lowered, and seven men jumped into her. They were armed with muskets; one took the yoke-lines, four others the oars, and the two others, kneeling in the bows, ready to fire, reconnoitred the island. Their object was no doubt to make an examination but not to land, for in the latter case they would have come in larger numbers. The pirates from their look-out could have seen that the coast was sheltered by an islet, separated from it by a channel half a mile in width. However, it was soon evident to Cyrus Harding, on observing the direction followed by the boat, that they would not attempt to penetrate into the channel, but would land on the islet.

Pencroft and Ayrton, each hidden in a narrow cleft of the rock, saw them coming directly towards them, and waited till they were within range.

The boat advanced with extreme caution. The oars only dipped into the water at long intervals. It could now be seen that one of the convicts held a lead-line in his hand, and that he wished to fathom the depth of the channel hollowed out by the current of the Mercy. This showed that it was Bob Harvey's intention to bring his brig as near as possible to the coast. About thirty pirates, scattered in the rigging, followed every movement of the boat, and took the bearings of certain landmarks which would allow them to approach without danger. The boat was not more than two cables-lengths off the islet when she stopped. The man at the tiller stood up and looked for the best place at which to land.

At that moment two shots were heard. Smoke curled up from among the rocks of the islet. The man at the helm and the man with the lead-line fell backwards into the boat. Ayrton's and Pencroft's balls had struck them both at the same moment.

Almost immediately a louder report was heard, a cloud of smoke issued from the brig's side, and a ball, striking the summit of the rock which sheltered Ayrton and Pencroft, made it fly in splinters, but the two marksmen remained unhurt.

Horrible imprecations burst from the boat, which immediately continued its way. The man who had been at the tiller was replaced by one of his comrades, and the oars were rapidly plunged into the water. However, instead of returning on board as might have been expected, the boat coasted along the islet, so as to round its southern point. The pirates pulled vigorously at their oars that they might get out of range of the bullets.

They advanced to within five cables-lengths of that part of the shore terminated by Flotsam Point, and after having rounded it in a semi-circular line, still protected by the brig's guns, they proceeded towards the mouth of the Mercy.

Their evident intention was to penetrate into the channel, and cut off the colonists posted on the islet, in such a way, that whatever their number might be, being placed between the fire from the boat and the fire from the brig, they would find themselves in a very disadvantageous position.

A quarter of an hour passed while the boat advanced in this direction. Absolute silence, perfect calm reigned in the air and on the water.

Pencroft and Ayrton, although they knew they ran the risk of being cut off, had not left their post, both that they did not wish to show themselves as yet to their assailants, and expose themselves to the "Speedy's" guns, and that they relied on Neb and Gideon Spilett, watching at the mouth of the river, and on Cyrus Harding and Herbert, in ambush among the rocks at the Chimneys.

Twenty minutes after the first shots were fired, the boat was less than two cables-lengths off the Mercy. As the tide was beginning to rise with its accustomed violence, caused by the narrowness of the straits, the pirates were drawn towards the river, and it was only by dint of hard rowing that they were able to keep in the middle of the channel. But, as they were passing within good range of the mouth of the Mercy, two balls saluted them, and two more of their number were laid in the bottom of the boat. Neb and Spilett had not missed their aim.

The brig immediately sent a second ball on the post betrayed by the smoke, but without any other result than that of splintering the rock.

The boat now contained only three able men. Carried on by the current, it shot through the channel with the rapidity of an arrow, passed before Harding and Herbert, who, not thinking it within range, withheld their fire, then, rounding the northern point of the islet with the two remaining oars, they pulled towards the brig.

Hitherto the settlers had nothing to complain of. Their adversaries had certainly had the worst of it. The latter already counted four men seriously wounded if not dead; they, on the contrary, unwounded, had not missed a shot. If the pirates continued to attack them in this way, if they renewed their attempt to land by means of a boat, they could be destroyed one by one.

It was now seen how advantageous the engineer's arrangements had been. The pirates would think that they had to deal with numerous and well-armed adversaries, whom they could not easily get the better of.

Half an hour passed before the boat, having to pull against the current, could get alongside the "Speedy." Frightful cries were heard when they returned on board with the wounded, and two or three guns were fired with no results.

But now about a dozen other convicts, maddened with rage, and possibly by the effect of the evening's potations, threw themselves into the boat. A second boat was also lowered, in

which eight men took their places, and while the first pulled straight for the islet, to dislodge the colonists from thence the second manoeuvred so as to force the entrance of the Mercy.

The situation was evidently becoming very dangerous for Pencroft and Ayrton, and they saw that they must regain the mainland.

However, they waited till the first boat was within range, when two well-directed balls threw its crew into disorder. Then, Pencroft and Ayrton, abandoning their posts, under fire from the dozen muskets, ran across the islet at full speed, jumped into their boat, crossed the channel at the moment the second boat reached the southern end, and ran to hide themselves in the Chimneys.

They had scarcely rejoined Cyrus Harding and Herbert, before the islet was overrun with pirates in every direction. Almost at the same moment, fresh reports resounded from the Mercy station, to which the second boat was rapidly approaching. Two, out of the eight men who manned her, were mortally wounded by Gideon Spilett and Neb, and the boat herself, carried irresistibly onto the reefs, was stove in at the mouth of the Mercy. But the six survivors, holding their muskets above their heads to preserve them from contact with the water, managed to land on the right bank of the river. Then, finding they were exposed to the fire of the ambush there, they fled in the direction of Flotsam Point, out of range of the balls.

The actual situation was this: on the islet were a dozen convicts, of whom some were no doubt wounded, but who had still a boat at their disposal; on the island were six, but who could not by any possibility reach Granite House, as they could not cross the river, all the bridges being raised.

“Hallo,” exclaimed Pencroft as he rushed into the Chimneys, “hallo, captain! What do you think of it, now?”

“I think,” answered the engineer, “that the combat will now take a new form, for it cannot be supposed that the convicts will be so foolish as to remain in a position so unfavourable for them!”

“They won’t cross the channel,” said the sailor. “Ayrton and Mr. Spilett’s rifles are there to prevent them. You know that they carry more than a mile!”

“No doubt,” replied Herbert; “but what can two rifles do against the brig’s guns?”

“Well, the brig isn’t in the channel yet, I fancy!” said Pencroft.

“But suppose she does come there?” said Harding.

“That’s impossible, for she would risk running aground and being lost!”

“It is possible,” said Ayrton. “The convicts might profit by the high tide to enter the channel, with the risk of grounding at low tide, it is true; but then, under the fire from her guns, our posts would be no longer tenable.”

“Confound them!” exclaimed Pencroft, “it really seems as if the blackguards were preparing to weigh anchor.”

“Perhaps we shall be obliged to take refuge in Granite House!” observed Herbert.

“We must wait!” answered Cyrus Harding.

“But Mr. Spilett and Neb?” said Pencroft.

“They will know when it is best to rejoin us. Be ready, Ayrton. It is yours and Spilett’s rifles which must speak now.”

It was only too true. The “Speedy” was beginning to weigh her anchor, and her intention was evidently to approach the islet. The tide would be rising for an hour and a half, and the ebb current being already weakened, it would be easy for the brig to advance. But as to entering the channel, Pencroft, contrary to Ayrton’s opinion, could not believe that she would dare to attempt it.

In the meanwhile, the pirates who occupied the islet had gradually advanced to the opposite shore, and were now only separated from the mainland by the channel.

Being armed with muskets alone, they could do no harm to the settlers, in ambush at the Chimneys and the mouth of the Mercy; but, not knowing the latter to be supplied with long-range rifles, they on their side did not believe themselves to be exposed. Quite uncovered, therefore, they surveyed the islet, and examined the shore.

Their illusion was of short duration. Ayrton’s and Gideon Spilett’s rifles then spoke, and no doubt imparted some very disagreeable intelligence to two of the convicts, for they fell backwards.

Then there was a general helter-skelter. The ten others, not even stopping to pick up their dead or wounded companions, fled to the other side of the islet, tumbled into the boat which had brought them, and pulled away with all their strength.

“Eight less!” exclaimed Pencroft. “Really, one would have thought that Mr. Spilett and Ayrton had given the word to fire together!”

“Gentlemen,” said Ayrton, as he reloaded his gun, “this is becoming more serious. The brig is making sail!”

“The anchor is weighed!” exclaimed Pencroft.

“Yes, and she is already moving.”

In fact, they could distinctly hear the creaking of the windlass. The “Speedy” was at first held by her anchor; then, when that had been raised, she began to drift towards the shore. The wind was blowing from the sea; the jib and the foretopsail were hoisted, and the vessel gradually approached the island.

From the two posts of the Mercy and the Chimneys they watched her without giving a sign of life, but not without some emotion. What could be more terrible for the colonists than to be

exposed, at a short distance, to the brig's guns, without being able to reply with any effect? How could they then prevent the pirates from landing?

Cyrus Harding felt this strongly, and he asked himself what it would be possible to do. Before long, he would be called upon for his determination. But what was it to be? To shut themselves up in Granite House, to be besieged there, to remain there for weeks, for months even, since they had an abundance of provisions? So far good! But after that? The pirates would not the less be masters of the island, which they would ravage at their pleasure, and in time, they would end by having their revenge on the prisoners in Granite House.

However, one chance yet remained; it was that Bob Harvey, after all, would not venture his ship into the channel, and that he would keep outside the islet. He would be still separated from the coast by half a mile, and at that distance his shot could not be very destructive.

"Never!" repeated Pencroft, "Bob Harvey will never, if he is a good seaman, enter that channel! He knows well that it would risk the brig, if the sea got up ever so little! And what would become of him without his vessel?"

In the meanwhile the brig approached the islet, and it could be seen that she was endeavouring to make the lower end. The breeze was light, and as the current had then lost much of its force, Bob Harvey had absolute command over his vessel.

The route previously followed by the boats had allowed her to reconnoitre the channel, and she boldly entered it.

The pirate's design was now only too evident; he wished to bring her broadside to bear on the Chimneys and from there to reply with shell and ball to the shot which had till then decimated her crew.

Soon the "Speedy" reached the point of the islet; she rounded it with ease; the mainsail was braced up, and the brig hugging the wind, stood across the mouth of the Mercy.

"The scoundrels! they are coming!" said Pencroft.

At that moment, Cyrus Harding, Ayrton, the sailor, and Herbert, were rejoined by Neb and Gideon Spilett.

The reporter and his companion had judged it best to abandon the post at the Mercy, from which they could do nothing against the ship, and they had acted wisely. It was better that the colonists should be together at the moment when they were about to engage in a decisive action. Gideon Spilett and Neb had arrived by dodging behind the rocks, though not without attracting a shower of bullets, which had not, however, reached them.

"Spilett! Neb!" cried the engineer. "You are not wounded?"

"No," answered the reporter, "a few bruises only from the ricochet! But that cursed brig has entered the channel!"

"Yes," replied Pencroft, "and in ten minutes she will have anchored before Granite House!"

“Have you formed any plan, Cyrus?” asked the reporter.

“We must take refuge in Granite House while there is still time, and the convicts cannot see us.”

“That is, my opinion, too,” replied Gideon Spilett, “but once shut up—”

“We must be guided by circumstances,” said the engineer.

“Let us be off, then, and make haste!” said the reporter.

“Would you not wish, captain, that Ayrton and I should remain here?” asked the sailor.

“What would be the use of that, Pencroft?” replied Harding. “No. We will not separate!”

There was not a moment to be lost. The colonists left the Chimneys. A bend of the cliff prevented them from being seen by those in the brig, but two or three reports, and the crash of bullets on the rock, told them that the “Speedy” was at no great distance.

To spring into the lift, hoist themselves up to the door of Granite House, where Top and Jup had been shut up since the evening before, to rush into the large room, was the work of a minute only.

It was quite time, for the settlers, through the branches, could see the “Speedy,” surrounded with smoke, gliding up the channel. The firing was incessant, and shot from the four guns struck blindly, both on the Mercy post, although it was not occupied, and on the Chimneys. The rocks were splintered, and cheers accompanied each discharge. However, they were hoping that Granite House would be spared, thanks to Harding’s precaution of concealing the windows when a shot, piercing the door, penetrated into the passage.

“We are discovered!” exclaimed Pencroft.

The colonists had not, perhaps, been seen, but it was certain that Bob Harvey had thought proper to send a ball through the suspected foliage which concealed that part of the cliff. Soon he redoubled his attack, when another ball having torn away the leafy screen, disclosed a gaping aperture in the granite.

The colonists’ situation was desperate. Their retreat was discovered. They could not oppose any obstacle to these missiles, nor protect the stone, which flew in splinters around them. There was nothing to be done but to take refuge in the upper passage of Granite House, and leave their dwelling to be devastated, when a deep roar was heard, followed by frightful cries!

Cyrus Harding and his companions rushed to one of the windows—

The brig, irresistibly raised on a sort of water-spout, had just split in two, and in less than ten seconds she was swallowed up with all her criminal crew!

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)

THE WANDERER'S NECKLACE by H Rider Haggard

Book II: Byzantium

Chapter VII: Victory or Valhalla!

A minute later I heard a rustle as of branches being moved by people thrusting their way through them. A choked voice commanded,

“Take him living or dead.”

Armed men appeared about us, four of them, and one cried “Yield!”

I sprang up and drew the Wanderer's sword.

“Who orders the General Michael to yield in his own command?” I asked.

“I do,” answered the man. “Yield or die!”

Now, thinking that these were robbers or murderers hired by some enemy, I sprang at him, nor was that battle long, for at my first stroke he fell dead. Then the other three set on me. But I wore mail beneath my doublet, as Irene had bade me do, and their swords glanced. Moreover, the old northern rage entered into me, and these easterners were no match for my skill and strength. First one and then another of them went down, whereon the third fled away, taking with him a grizzly wound behind, for I struck him as he fled.

“Now it seems there is an end of that,” I gasped to Heliodore, who was crouched upon the seat. “Come, let me take you to your father and summon my guards, ere we meet more of these murderers.”

As I spoke a cloaked and hooded woman glided from the shelter of the trees behind and stood before us. She threw back the hood from her head and the moonlight fell upon her face. It was that of the Empress, but oh! so changed by jealous rage that I should scarce have known her. The large eyes seemed to flash fire, the cheeks were white, save where they had been touched with paint, the lips trembled. Twice she tried to speak and failed, but at the third effort words came.

“Nay, all is but begun,” she said in a voice that was full of hate. “Know that I have heard your every word. So, traitor, you would tell my secrets to this Egyptian slut and then murder my own servants,” and she pointed to the dead and wounded men. “Well, you shall pay for it, both of you, that I swear.”

“Is it murder, Augusta,” I asked, saluting, “when four assail one man, and, thinking them assassins, he fights for his life and wins the fray?”

“What are four such curs against you? I should have brought a dozen. Yet it was at me you struck. Whate'er they did I ordered them to do.”

“Had I known it, Augusta, I would never have drawn sword, who am your officer and obedient to the end.”

“Nay, you’d stab me with your tongue, not with your sword,” she answered with something like a sob. “You say you are my obedient officer. Well, now we will see. Smite me that bold-faced baggage dead, or smite me dead, I care not which, then fall upon your sword.”

“The first I cannot do, Augusta, for it would be murder against one who has done no wrong, and I will not stain my soul with murder.”

“Done no wrong! Has she not mocked me, my years, my widowhood, yes, and even my hair, in the pride of her—her youth, me, the Empress of the World?”

Now Heliodore spoke for the first time.

“And has not the Empress of the World called a poor maid of blood as noble as her own by shameful names?” she asked.

“For the second,” I went on before Irene could answer, “I cannot do that either, for it would be foul treason as well as murder to lift my sword against your anointed Majesty. But as for the third, as is my duty, that I will do—or rather suffer your servants to do—if it pleases you to repeat the order later when you are calm.”

“What!” cried Heliodore, “would you go and leave me here? Then, Olaf, by the gods my forefathers worshipped for ten thousand years, and by the gods I worship, I’ll find a means to follow you within an hour. Oh! Empress of the World, there is another world you do not rule, and there we’ll call you to account.”

Now Irene stared at Heliodore, and Heliodore stared back at her, and the sight was very strange.

“At least you have spirit, girl. But think not that shall save you, for there’s no room for both of us on earth.”

“If I go it may prove wide enough, Augusta,” I broke in.

“Nay, you shall not go, Olaf, at least not yet. My orders are that you do not fall upon your sword. As for this Egyptian witch, well, presently my people will be here; then we will see.”

Now I drew Heliodore to the trunk of the great tree which stood nearby and set myself in front of her.

“What are you about to do?” asked the Empress.

“I am about to fight your eastern curs until I fall, for no northern man will lift a sword against me, even on your orders, Augusta. When I am down, this lady must play her own part as God shall guide her.”

“Have no fear, Olaf,” Heliodore said gently, “I wear a dagger.”

Scarcely had she spoken when there was a sound of many feet. The man whom I had wounded had run shouting towards the palace, rousing the soldiers, both those on watch and

those in their quarters. Now these began to arrive and to gather in the glade before the clump of trees, for some guards who had heard the clash of arms guided them to the place. They were of all races and sundry regiments, Greeks, Byzantines, Bulgars, Armenians, so-called Romans, and with them a number of Britons and northern men.

Seeing the Empress and, nearby, myself standing with drawn sword against the tree sheltering the lady Heliodore, also on the ground those whom I had cut down, they halted. One of their officers asked what they must do.

“Kill me that man who has slain my servants, or stay—take him living,” screamed the Augusta.

Now among those who had gathered was a certain lieutenant of my own, a blue-eyed, flax-haired Norwegian giant of the name of Jodd. This man loved me like a brother, I believe because once it had been my fortune to save his life. Also often I had proved his friend when he was in trouble, for in those days Jodd got drunk at times, and when he was drunk lost money which he could not pay.

Now, when he saw my case, I noted that this Jodd, who, if sober, was no fool at all, although he seemed so slow and stupid, whispered something to a comrade who was with him, whereon the man turned and fled away like an arrow. From the direction in which he went I guessed at once that he was running to the barracks close at hand, where were stationed quite three hundred Northmen, all of whom were under my command.

The soldiers prepared to obey the Augusta’s orders, as they were bound to do. They drew their swords and a number of them advanced towards me slowly. Then it was that Jodd, with a few Northmen, moved between them and me, and, saluting the Empress, said in his bad Greek,

“Your pardon, Augusta, but why are we asked to kill our own general?”

“Obey my orders, fellow,” she answered.

“Your pardon, Augusta,” said the stolid Jodd, “but before we kill our own general, whom you commanded us to obey in all things, we would know why we must kill him. It is a custom of our country that no man shall be killed until he has been heard. General Olaf,” and drawing his short sword for the first time, he saluted me in form, “be pleased to explain to us why you are to be killed or taken prisoner.”

Now a tumult arose, and a eunuch in the background shouted to the soldiers to obey the Empress’s orders, whereon again some of them began to advance.

“If no answer is given to my question,” went on Jodd in his slow, bull-like voice, “I fear that others must be killed besides the General Olaf. Ho! Northmen. To me, Northmen! Ho! Britons, to me, Britons! Ho! Saxons, to me, Saxons! Ho! all who are not accursed Greeks. To me all who are not accursed Greeks!”

Now at each cry of Jodd’s men leapt forward from the gathering crowd, and, to the number of fifty or more in all, marshalled themselves behind him, those of each nation standing shoulder to shoulder in little groups before me.

“Is my question to be answered?” asked Jodd. “Because, if not, although we be but one against ten, I think that ere the General Olaf is cut down or taken there will be good fighting this night.”

Then I spoke, saying,

“Captain Jodd, and comrades, I will answer your question, and if I speak wrongly let the Augusta correct me. This is the trouble. The lady Heliodore here is my affianced wife. We were speaking together in this garden as the affianced do. The Empress, who, unseen by us, was hidden behind those trees, overheard our talk, which, for reasons best known to herself, for in it there was naught of treason or any matter of the State, made her so angry that she set her servants on to kill me. Thinking them murderers or robbers, I defended myself, and there they lie, save one, who fled away wounded. Then the Empress appeared and ordered me to kill the lady Heliodore. Comrades, look on her whom the Empress ordered me to kill, and say whether, were she your affianced, you would kill her even to please the Empress,” and, stepping to one side, I showed them Heliodore in all her loveliness standing against the tree, the drawn dagger in her hand.

Now from those that Jodd had summoned there went up a roar of “No,” while even the rest were silent. Irene sprang forward and cried,

“Are my orders to be canvassed and debated? Obey! Cut this man down or take him living, I care not which, and with him all who cling to him, or to-morrow you hang, every one of you.”

Now the soldiers who had gathered also began to form up under their officers, for they saw that before them was war and death. By this time they were many, and as the alarm spread minute by minute more arrived.

“Yield or we attack,” said he who had taken command of them.

“I do not think that we yield,” answered Jodd; and just then there came a sound of men running in ordered companies from the direction of the Northmen’s barracks were Jodd’s messenger had told his tale.

“I am sure that we do not yield,” continued Jodd, and suddenly raised the wild northern war-cry, “Valhalla, Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!”

Instantly from three hundred throats, above the sound of the running feet that drew ever nearer, came the answering shout of “Valhalla, Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!” Then out of the gloom up dashed the Northmen.

Now other shouts arose of “Olaf! Olaf! Olaf! Where is our General Olaf? Where is Red-Sword?”

“Here, comrades!” roared Jodd, and up they came those fierce, bearded men, glad with the lust of battle, and ranged themselves by companies before us. Again the great voice of Jodd was heard, calling,

“Empress, do you give us Olaf and his girl and swear by your Christ that no harm shall come to them? Or must we take them for ourselves?”

“Never!” she cried back. “The only thing I give to you is death. On to these rebels, soldiers!”

Now, seeing what must come, I strove to speak, but Jodd shouted again,

“Be silent, Olaf. For this hour you are not our general; you are a prisoner whom it pleases us to rescue. Ring him round, Northmen, ring him round. Bring the Empress, too; she will serve as hostage.”

Now some of them drew behind us. Then they began to advance, taking us along with them, and I, who was skilled in war, saw their purpose. They were drawing out into the open glade, where they could see to fight, and where their flanks would be protected by a stream of water on the one hand and a dense belt of trees on the other.

In her rage the Empress threw herself upon the ground, but two great fellows lifted her up by the arms and thrust her along with us. Marching thus, we reached the point that they had chosen, for the Greeks were in confusion and not ready to attack. There we halted, just on the crest of a little rise of ground.

“Augusta,” I said, “in the name of God, I pray you to give way. These Northmen hate your Byzantines, and will take this chance to pay off their scores. Moreover, they love me, and will die to a man ere they see me harmed, and then how shall I protect you in the fray?”

She only glared at me and made no answer.

The attack began. By this time fifteen hundred or so of the Imperial troops had collected, and against them stood, perhaps, four hundred men in all, so that the odds were great. Still, they had no horsemen or archers, and our position was very good, also we were Northmen and they were Grecian scum.

On came the Byzantines, screaming “Irene! Irene!” in a formation of companies ranged one behind the other, for their object was to break in our centre by their weight. Jodd saw, and gave some orders; very good orders, I thought them. Then he sheathed his short-sword, seized the great battle-axe which was his favourite weapon, and placed himself in front of our triple line that waited in dead silence.

Up the slope surged the charge, and on the crest of it the battle met. At first the weight of the Greeks pressed us back, but, oh! they went down before the Northmen’s steel like corn before the sickle, and soon that rush was stayed. Breast to breast they hewed and thrust, and so fearful was the fray that Irene, forgetting her rage, clung to me to protect her.

The fight hung doubtful. As in a dream, I watched the giant Jodd cut down a gorgeous captain, the axe shearing through his golden armour as though it were but silk. I watched a comrade of my own fall beneath a spear-thrust. I gazed at the face of Heliodore, who stared wide-eyed at the red scene, and at the white-lipped Irene, who was clinging to my arm. Now we were being pressed back again, we who at this point had at most two hundred men, some of whom were down, to bear the onslaught of twice that number, and, do what I would, my fingers strayed to my sword-hilt.

Our triple line bent in like a bow and began to break. The scales of war hung on the turn, when, from the dense belt of trees upon our left, suddenly rose the cry of “Valhalla! Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!” for which I, who had overheard Jodd’s orders, was waiting. These were his orders—that half of the Northmen should creep down behind the belt of trees in their dense shadow, and thus outflank the foe.

Forth they sprang by companies of fifty, the moonlight gleaming on their mail, and there, three hundred yards away, a new battle was begun. Now the Greeks in front of us, fearing for their rear, wavered a moment and fell back, perhaps, ten paces. I saw the opportunity and could bear no more, who before all things was a soldier.

Shouting to some of our wounded to watch the women, I drew my sword and leapt forward.

“I come, Northmen!” I cried, and was greeted with a roar of:

“Olaf Red-Sword! Follow Olaf Red-Sword!” for so the soldiers named me.

“Steady, Northmen! Shoulder to shoulder, Northmen!” I cried back. “Now at them! Charge! Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!”

Down the slope they went before our rush. In thirty paces they were but a huddled mob, on which our swords played like lightnings. We rolled them back on to their supports, and those supports, outflanked, began to flee. We swept through and through them. We slew them by hundreds, we trod them beneath our victorious feet, and—oh! in that battle a strange thing happened to me. I thought I saw my dead brother Ragnar fighting at my side; aye, and I thought I heard him cry to me, in that lost, remembered voice:

“The old blood runs in you yet, you Christian man! Oh! you fight well, you Christian man. We of Valhalla give you greetings, Olaf Red-Sword. Valhalla! Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!”

It was done. Some were fled, but more were dead, for, once at grips, the Northman showed no mercy to the Greek. Back we came, those who were left of us, for many, perhaps a hundred, were not, and formed a ring round the women and the wounded.

“Well done, Olaf,” said Heliodore; but Irene only looked at me with a kind of wonder in her eyes.

Now the leaders of the Northmen began to talk among themselves, but although from time to time they glanced at me, they did not ask me to join in their talk. Presently Jodd came forward and said in his slow voice:

“Olaf Red-Sword, we love you, who have always loved us, your comrades, as we have shown you to-night. You have led us well, Olaf, and, considering our small numbers, we have just won a victory of which we are proud. But our necks are in the noose, as yours is, and we think that in this case our best course is to be bold. Therefore, we name you Cæsar. Having defeated the Greeks, we propose now to take the palace and to talk with the regiments without, many of whom are disloyal and shout for Constantine, whom after all they hate only a little less than they do Irene yonder. We know not what will be the end of the matter and do

not greatly care, who set our fortunes upon a throw of the dice, but we think there is a good chance of victory. Do you accept, and will you throw in your sword with ours?"

"How can I," I answered, "when there stands the Empress, whose bread I have eaten and to whom I have sworn fealty?"

"An Empress, it seems, who desires to slay you over some matter that has to do with a woman. Olaf, the daggers of her assassins have cut this thread of fealty. Moreover, as it chances she is in our power, and as we cannot make our crime against her blacker than it is, we propose to rid you and ourselves of this Empress, who is our enemy, and who for her great wickedness well deserves to die. Such is our offer, to take or to leave, as time is short. Should you refuse it, we abandon you to your fate, and go to make our terms with Constantine, who also hates this Empress and even now is plotting her downfall."

As he spoke I saw certain men draw near to Irene for a purpose which I could guess, and stepped between her and them.

"The Augusta is my mistress," I said, "and although I attacked some of her troops but now, and she has wronged me much, still I defend her to the last."

"Little use in that, Olaf, seeing that you are but one and we are many," answered Jodd. "Come, will you be Cæsar, or will you not?"

Now Irene crept up behind me and whispered in my ear.

"Accept," she said. "It pleases me well. Be Cæsar as my husband. So you will save my life and my throne, of which I vow to you an equal share. With the help of your Northmen and the legions I command and who cling to me, we can defeat Constantine and rule the world together. This petty fray is nothing. What matters it if some lives have been lost in a palace tumult? The world lies in your grasp; take it, Olaf, and, with it, me."

I heard and understood. Now had come the great moment of my life. Something told me that on the one hand were majesty and empire; on the other much pain and sorrow yet with these a certain holy joy and peace. It was the latter that I chose, as doubtless Fate or God had decreed that I should do.

"I thank you, Augusta," I said, "but, while I can protect her, I will not seize a throne over the body of one who has been kind to me, nor will I buy it at the price you offer. There stands my predestined wife, and I can marry no other woman."

Now Irene turned to Heliodore, and said in a swift, low voice:

"Do you understand this matter, lady? Let us have done with jealousies and be plain, for the lives of all of us hang upon threads that, for some, must break within a day or two, and with them those of a thousand, thousand others. Aye, the destiny of the world is at stake. You say you love this man, whom I will tell you I love also. Well, if you win him, and he lives, which he scarce can hope to do, he gets your kisses in whatever corner of the earth will shelter him and you. If I win him, the empire of the earth is his. Moreover, girl," she added with meaning, "empresses are not always jealous; sometimes even they can look the other way. There would be high place for you within our Court, and, who knows? Your turn might come at length."

Also your father's plans would be forwarded to the last pound of gold in our treasury and the last soldier in our service. Within five years, mayhap, he might rule Egypt as our Governor. What say you?"

Heliodore looked at the Empress with that strange, slow smile of hers. Then she looked at me, and answered:

"I say what Olaf says. There are two empires in the case. One, which you can give, Augusta, is of the world; the other, which I can give him here, is only a woman's heart, yet, as I think, of another eternal world that you do not know. I say what Olaf says. Let Olaf speak, Augusta."

"Empress," I said slowly, "again I thank you, but it may not be. My fate lies here," and I laid my hand upon the heart of Heliodore.

"You are mistaken, Olaf," answered the Empress, in a cold and quiet voice, but seemingly without anger; "your fate lies there," and she pointed to the ground, then added, "Believe me, I am sorry, for you are a man of whom any woman might be proud—yes, even an empress. I have always thought it, and I thought it again just now when I saw you lead that charge against those curs in armour," and she pointed towards the bodies of the Greeks. "So, it is finished, as perchance I am. If I must die, let it be on your sword, Olaf."

"Your answer, Olaf Red-Sword!" called Jodd. "You have talked enough."

"Your answer! Yes, your answer!" the Northmen echoed.

"The Empress has offered to share her crown with me, Jodd, but, friends, it cannot be, because of this lady to whom I am affianced."

"Marry them both," shouted a rude voice, but Jodd replied:

"Then that is soon settled. Out of our path, Olaf, and look the other way. When you turn your head again there will be no Empress to trouble you, except one of your own choosing."

On hearing these words, and seeing the swords draw near, Irene clutched hold of me, for always she feared death above everything.

"You will not see me butchered?" she gasped.

"Not while I live," I answered. "Hearken, friends. I am the general of the Augusta's guard, and if she dies, for honour's sake I must die first. Strike, then, if you will, but through my body."

"Tear her away!" called a voice.

"Comrades," I went on, "be not so mad. To-night we have done that which has earned us death, but while the Empress lives you have a hostage in your hands with whom you can buy pardon. As a lump of clay what worth is she to you? Hark! The regiments from the city!"

As I spoke, from the direction of the palace came a sound of many voices and of the tread of five thousand feet.

“True enough,” said Jodd, with composure. “They are on us, and now it is too late to storm the palace. Olaf, like many another man, you have lost your chance of glory for a woman, or, who knows, perhaps you’ve won it. Well, comrades, as I take it you are not minded to fly and be hunted down like rats, only one thing remains—to die in a fashion they will remember in Byzantium. Olaf, you’d best mind the women; I will take command. Ring round, comrades, ring round! ‘Tis a good place for it. Set the wounded in the middle. Keep that Empress living for the present, but when all is done, kill her. We’ll be her escort to the gates of hell, for there she’s bound if ever woman was.”

Then, without murmur or complaint, almost in silence, indeed, they formed Odin’s Ring, that triple circle of the Northmen doomed to die; the terrible circle that on many a battlefield has been hidden at last beneath the heap of fallen foes.

The regiments moved up; there were three of them of full strength. Irene stared about her, seeking some loophole of escape, and finding none. Heliodore and I talked together in low tones, making our tryst beyond the grave. The regiments halted within fifty paces of us. They liked not the look of Odin’s Ring, and the ground over which they had marched and the fugitives with whom they had spoken told them that many of them looked their last upon the moon.

Some mounted generals rode towards us and asked who was in command of the Northmen. When they learned that it was Jodd, they invited him to a parley. The end of it was that Jodd and two others stepped twenty paces from our ranks, and met a councillor—it was Stauracius—and two of the generals in the open, where no treachery could well be practised, especially as Stauracius was not a man of war. Here they talked together for a long while. Then Jodd and his companions returned, and Jodd said, so that all might hear him:

“Hearken. These are the terms offered: That we return to our barracks in peace, bearing our weapons. That nothing be laid to our charge under any law, military or civil, by the State or private persons, for this night’s slaying and tumult, and that in guarantee thereof twelve hostages of high rank, upon whose names we have agreed, be given into our keeping. That we retain our separate stations in the service of the Empire, or have leave to quit that service within three months, with the gratuity of a quarter’s pay, and go where we will unmolested. But that, in return for these boons, we surrender the person of the Empress unharmed, and with her that of the General Olaf, to whom a fair trial is promised before a military court. That with her own voice the Augusta shall confirm all these undertakings before she leaves our ranks. Such is the offer, comrades.”

“And if we refuse it, what?” asked a voice.

“This: That we shall be ringed round, and either starved out or shot down by archers. Or, if we try to escape, that we shall be overwhelmed by numbers, and any of us who chance to be taken living shall be hanged, sound and wounded together.”

Now the leaders of the Northmen consulted. Irene watched them for a while, then turned to me and asked,

“What will they do, Olaf?”

“I cannot say, Augusta,” I answered, “but I think that they will offer to surrender you and not myself, since they may doubt them of that fair trial which is promised to me.”

“Which means,” she said, “that, whether I live or die, all these brave men will be sacrificed to you, Olaf, who, after all, must perish with them, as will this Egyptian. Are you prepared to accept that blood-offering, Olaf? If so, you must have changed from the man I loved.”

“No, Augusta,” I answered, “I am not prepared. Rather would I trust myself into your power, Augusta.”

The conference of the officers had come to an end. Their leader advanced and said,

“We accept the terms, except as to the matter of Olaf Red-Sword. The Empress may go free, but Olaf Red-Sword, our general whom we love, we will not surrender. First will we die.”

“Good!” said Jodd. “I looked for such words from you.”

Then he marched out, with his companions, and again met Stauracius and the two generals of the Greeks. After they had talked a little while he returned and said,

“Those two officers, being men, would have agreed, but Stauracius, the eunuch, who seems in command, will not agree. He says that Olaf Red-Sword must be surrendered with the Empress. We answered that in this case soon there would be no Empress to surrender except one ready for burial. He replied that was as God might decree; either both must be surrendered or both be held.”

“Do you know why the dog said that?” whispered Irene to me. “It was because those Northmen have let slip the offer I made to you but now, and he is jealous of you, and fears you may take his power. Well, if I live, one day he shall pay for this who cares so little for my life.”

So she spoke, but I made no answer. Instead, I turned to Heliodore, saying,

“You see how matters stand, beloved. Either I must surrender myself, or all these brave men must perish, and we with them. For myself, I am ready to die, but I am not willing that you and they should die. Also, if I yield, I can do no worse than die, whereas perchance after all things will take another turn. Now what say you?”

“I say, follow your heart, Olaf,” she replied steadily. “Honour comes first of all. The rest is with God. Wherever you go there I soon shall be.”

“I thank you,” I answered; “your mind is mine.”

Then I stepped forward and said,

“Comrades, it is my turn to throw in this great game. I have heard and considered all, and I think it best that I should be surrendered, with the Augusta, to the Greeks.”

“We will not surrender you,” they shouted.

“Comrades, I am still your general, and my order is that you surrender me. Also, I have other orders to give to you. That you guard this lady Heliodore to the last, and that, while one of you remains alive, she shall be to you as though she were that man’s daughter, or mother, or sister, to help and protect as best he may in every circumstance, seen or unforeseen. Further, that with her you guard her father, the noble Egyptian Magas. Will you promise this to me?”

“Aye!” they roared in answer.

“You hear them, Heliodore,” I said. “Know that henceforth you are one of a large family, and, however great your enemies, that you will never lack a friend. Comrades,” I went on, “this is my second order, and perchance the last that I shall ever give to you. Unless you hear that I am evilly treated in the palace yonder, stay quiet. But if that tidings should reach you, then all oaths are broken. Do what you can and will.”

“Aye!” they roared again.

Afterwards what happened? It comes back to me but dimly. I think they swore the Empress on the Blood of Christ that I should go unharmed. I think I embraced Heliodore before them all, and gave her into their keeping. I think I whispered into the ear of Jodd to seek out the Bishop Barnabas, and pray him to get her and her father away to Egypt without delay—yes, even by force, if it were needful. Then I think I left their lines, and that, as I went, leading the Augusta by the hand, they gave to me the general’s salute. That I turned and saluted them in answer ere I yielded myself into the power of my god-father, Stauracius, who greeted me with a false and sickly smile.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)

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

Lovecraftiana is a quarterly publication from Rogue Planet Press, with issues coming out April 30th, July 31st, October 31st, and January 31st, featuring stories, articles, poetry or artwork on Cthulhu Mythos / Lovecraftian themes.

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