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Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 13, ISSUE 29
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THE LEPER

BY EVAN
RODENHAUSEN
*HE FALLS
APART...*

FINGER COUNTING

BY MICHAEL D
DAVIS
*SCHOOL GIRL
VILLAINS...*

HELL YEAH BY ROB BLISS

THE STRAW MAN COMETH CONTINUES...

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Gavin Chappell

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 13, Issue 29
18th November 2018

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

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

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *Gollum* by *Argent-Sky*. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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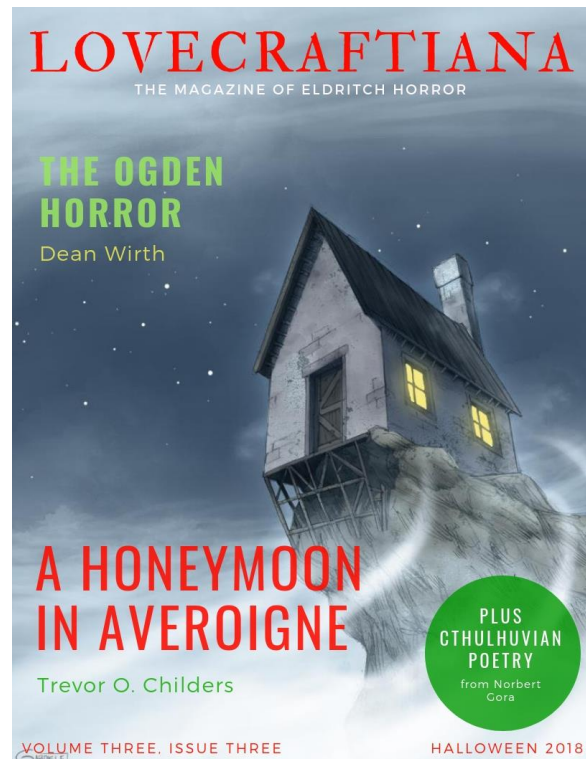
EDITORIAL

This week, Satan discovers time travel. Charlie Ray buys a leper. Two alienated children find a strange link between each other. Fauna, Flora, and the Challenger's adventure continues.

Kursaal consummates forbidden love. Mud and Rat discuss business. Malone learns his companions are the prisoners of the ape-men. And Larry reminisces about leprechauns.

—Gavin Chappell

Now out from Rogue Planet Press: [*Lovecraftiana: Halloween Eve 2018*](#).



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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



**"YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO LEARN NOT TO PUT ALL OF YOUR
HEADS IN ONE BASKET CLAUDE!"**

Vincent is an artist who has consistently been on assignment in the art world for over twenty

years. Throughout his career he has acquired a toolbox of diverse skills (from freehand drawing to digital design, t-shirt designer to muralist). His styles range from the wildly abstract to pulp style comics.

In 2013, his work in END TIMES won an award in the Best Horror Anthology category for that year. When Vincent is not at his drawing board he can be found in the classroom teaching cartooning and illustration to his students at Westchester Community College in Valhalla NY.

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

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

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HELL YEAH by Rob Bliss

In the Year 6666 A.D., Satan had finally perfected time travel. God was jealous and started dressing up as a demon to infiltrate Hell and find out how Satan had figured out the impossible. But none of the demons would tell Him. They all saw through His disguise (the poorly-dyed beard, the five toes on each foot, the halo), and demons were more faithful to Satan than God's angels were to Him.

Satan went back in time and met Jesus when he was seventeen years old. The Bible says nothing about this meeting. The Dark Lord knew teenage boys like the back of his claw since so many had been sent to Hell for minor infractions.

“Wanna go to a party?”

“Hell yeah!” Jesus replied.

Satan had VIP status with all the Roman emperors. He was allowed one guest per orgy. Jesus got wrecked on wine. Satan, or a Roman, slipped some opium into one goblet of Jesus' wine and has into another. Jesus later called wine the miracle drink.

Jesus got laid. By slave women—the best kind. And by boys. Very young boys. Very, very young ... boys. (Starting a trend.) But, of all his conquests, he liked the hermaphrodites. He was Jesus—he loved everybody.

A few days later, Jesus was resurrected from his hangover. He couldn't recognize himself until he had something to eat. Satan asked him if he liked the party.

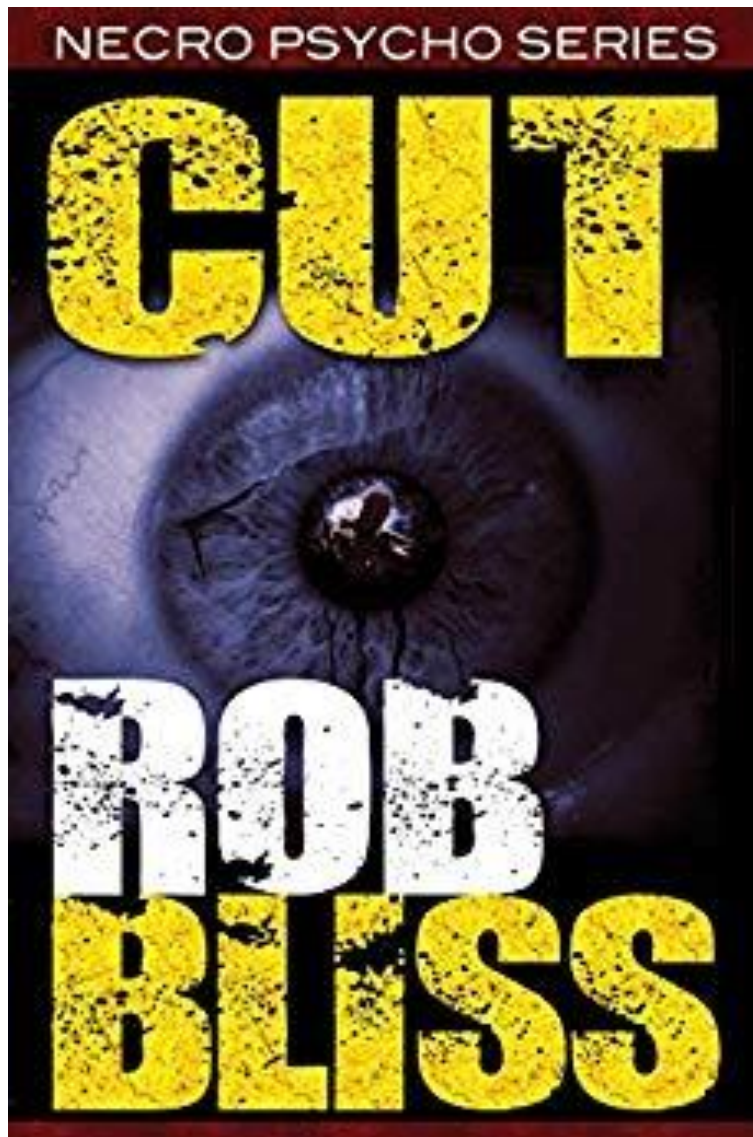
“Hell yeah! Can we do it again?” the Son of God pleaded.

Satan said, “Join me and you can do it for all time. From B.C. to A.D.”

“Hell yeah—I'm in!”

And so Anno Domini was born.

THE END



Available from [Amazon](#).

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THE LEPER by Evan Rodenhausen

They had heard that a man was walking another man around town on a chain leash and iron collar. No one Charlie Ray knew had actually seen them, but they all spoke as if they had. July heat was pouring off the brows of these men as they sat around Judd Spitkow's porch. It pressed down from the sky like an added burden, pulsed through the thick air like the croak of a bullfrog, all weight and slime. Each man spoke in turn and each other man listened, or pretended to. They were thinking about the man on the leash and no one who said anything really knew a damn.

"It's like the bible," Charlie said when it was his turn.

"You don't know shit about the bible, Charlie," someone spoke up.

"I'm telling you, they used to walk people around on chains back then. Slaves and such."

"No stuff like that is in the bible, Charlie."

"Well, you must not've read it."

"You can't read shit, Charlie," someone else said.

Later that night, Charlie Ray lie awake in bed with Nellie snoring next to him. He wanted to speak to the chained-up man. What would he say? How did it happen? Maybe then the men would stop funning him about his wife or his busted air-conditioner. All of them were broken up too. They had kids strung out in the streets, piling up like plague victims. But not him. No, sir, not Charlie—his daughters were good.

Well, The Man Who Grants Wishes must have been listening because the next night there was a knock at the door. They were finishing up dinner, unable to speak over the blowing of all the fans, sweating into their food and thinking numb thoughts. Charlie went to the door and when he opened it he saw a low, smiling man with a hat and ragged suit, bright button shirt and polka-dot tie, all of him moist and beaten by the heat. He held a chain leash in his right hand that was attached to a rusty iron collar fastened around another man's neck.

"Hello," the low-man said. His voice was deep and long and gravelly, almost musical.

"Hello," Charlie said. He looked at the low-man and then saw the leash. The porch light was dim, made dimmer by the moths and night-bugs that covered it. The chained-man was hard to discern but he was tall and hunched, gaunt. A moth adjusted its position and splashed his face in a second of light. It was yellowed and blackened and seemed to be missing pieces.

"Would you like to buy this leper?" the low-man said. He yanked on the leash and the leper shifted his feet, bounced his shoulders, raised and dropped his arms in presentation. Charlie watched and didn't respond when his wife called to him over the fans.

"Who's that, Charlie? Could you shut the door, you're letting the heat in."

Charlie's mouth was open, his eyes clouded over like crystal balls, gazing at the leper.

"Charlie?"

He shook his head like a man dragged from a pool and stepped to the side, motioning the low-man and his leper into the house. The low-man peered in, his face squinting up at the light, looking like a cat, and said, "No, thank you. We must be going." But the low-man didn't move.

"Wait!" Charlie said. He went out onto the porch and the screen door clanged shut behind him. They were painted in shadow and half-light. "What is he? What does he do?"

"He is a leper. He falls apart."

"Charlie?" It was his wife, marked with holes from the door's mesh screen. Her voice was soft. "Who's this man?"

"Chahhh-lee," the low-man said, his voice winding like a secret path through the woods. "Would you buy this leper?"

Charlie's mouth had not closed. His face wore age and wear in deep pockets of purple flesh, in hard lines, in blue veins that crisscrossed his forehead like scars of old time.

"Twenty bucks," Charlie said.

"Twenty dollars? No, I do not think twenty dollars is good enough. This is a man we're talking about."

"Thirty bucks. Forty."

"Charlie, we need that money."

"You need it," he hollered back at her. "Fifty. Fifty bucks, I don't have any more money."

"Fifty dollars?" the low-man said, considering with a tilt of his head. "Fifty will do."

"Yes," Charlie said. He hunched over, smiling, getting as close to the low-man's level as he could. "Yes, thank you."

Charlie gave the low-man the fifty dollars he had in his wallet and the low-man took it and handed Charlie the leash and walked away. There were no lights beyond the porch and the man disappeared down the hill, into the darkness of the land. Cicadas sang and frogs sobbed and hot wind rustled all of the plants and trees.

The screen door opened and Nellie stood next to him, looking out at the night.

“What’ve you done, Charlie?”

He looked at her. She was tall like him with long bones and skin as tight as plastic wrap. He thought she looked like a child you’d see at a sideshow. “Something good,” he said, and went inside with his leper.

The ceiling fan blew about cobwebs and a fine dust that fell over the room and the light hanging beneath it was old enough to glow rusty, the living room old wood and old furniture and a big screen TV. Charlie watched the leper move his head slowly and take in these familiar things. He saw the leper’s old clothes: what might have been the chewed-off remains of a grey-green suit, a once-white dress shirt now yellow with deep red and black coagulations staining it, shoes with holes at the toes and holes on the soles.

His body oozed and ran, folded upon itself, broke open; revealed its frame and flesh, the things that made it run and the things that failed it, inch by inch. He had clear blue eyes that looked as if they might slip away like raindrops.

Nellie stayed outside. The kids were silent at the dining room table, staring at Charlie and his purchase. The only sound was the whirr of a half-dozen fans.

“Sandy, get me a rope from the shed. Two of ‘em, long and thick.”

“What is he, Dad?” Sandy said.

A smile crept across Charlie’s face, childlike and prideful. “It’s a leper,” he said. “I bought us a leper. You see?” Charlie tugged on the leash the way he had seen the low-man do it and the leper did his little presentation in turn. Charlie beamed. “Now get the rope, honey.”

Sandy hesitated, then got up and went through the kitchen, out the backdoor. Tess, long and bony like himself and her mother, stared. “What should we name him, Tess?” Charlie said.

Her mouth was agape like Charlie’s had been. Her eyes flashed like old camera bulbs.

“Tess?”

The chain between Charlie and the leper swung back and forth in little arcs, tinkling and rattling like fine things in an expensive store, clink, clink, clink.

“Tess?”

Clink, clink, clink...

Judd Spitkow lived down in the valley of Cellarton, his house marked by the alien-green and rose-red wall-lights that flanked his front door and flooded his porch with colour. Men of the

town, sitting on old barrels, old stools, old chairs, old windowsills, hung around on the porch in a loose circle, looking down at their feet or into the wrinkles of their skin or off into the night waiting for something to happen that never did. They did this most nights.

Someone was rambling and no one was listening when someone else noticed the first tinkling, clinking, rattling of metal off in the distance.

“Huh?” Tom Dylan said.

“Quiet,” Fred Gabriel said.

“Can’t hear nothing,” Malachi said.

And the tinkling clinking rattling got louder, came nearer, conjured thoughts and images, fears and expectations, in minds that were dusty like the tops of old ceiling fans, until every face was floating in the dark circle, their eyes ranging out to see whatever was coming towards them from the blackness.

“Ah it’s just Charlie, the bastard.”

There were swears and mutterings and creaking sounds as people shifted in their seats. Charlie was wearing a grin and carrying a silver lump of something as he walked into the alien light.

“You never been good at jokes, Charlie,” Judd said. His voice was hard and sweet, like a piece of raw chocolate.

Charlie strolled up to the porch railing and threw the mess of chain leash and iron collar over. It landed in the circle. “You’ll never guess what I bought,” Charlie said. He walked away then, out of the sinister light and into the darkness. “Come on up and see. Come on up and see...”

The men waited, muttering, and then one and all of them got up and drove their old trucks or walked their old asses up the hill to Charlie Ray’s place.

Charlie went up to the attic to check on the thing, the naked lightbulb a bright yellow, all the wood loud and warped. The leper stood at the back of the room, half in shadow, tied to an old radiator with braided rope. Charlie had chopped the second length of rope that Sandy had brought him into two pieces, fastened a collar out of the one, and tied the leper’s hands in a bond with the other; didn’t want any of the visitors to be nervous.

He had spoken soothingly to the leper as he took him to the second floor and up the pull-down steps that led to the attic. “All ok. This is a nice place to live. Real nice. We got lights and its real warm up here too, at least in the summer. No cold nights.”

The leper had said nothing.

When he was tied up, Charlie had sat down across from him, Indian-style, just out of arms' reach. He motioned the leper to sit with him. The leper contorted his limbs, made shapes out of them he should not have been able to, and fell to the floor like a child. His hands were splayed out on the floor and he stared at them for a long time. Charlie stared too. Some of the fingers were missing. The rest of them looked like the root end of a parsnip.

"I know you're all tied up," Charlie had said. "I hope that's ok. I know it might not seem like it..." Charlie had looked down at his own hands resting on the attic floor then. Sweat dripped onto them. His fingers were dirty and worn looking, unused like old cars in a junk lot. "I know it might not seem like it, but you're real important around here."

The leper had said nothing. Charlie noticed a strained, wheezing breath escaping the thing's mouth.

"You're king. Really. You're like a king. This is your palace, and that," he'd pointed to the radiator, "that's your throne. Might not be much, but it's what I can do."

He'd looked at the leper. The skin had taken on a greenish tint, eyes floating in slime. "You're everything to this house."

Now, Charlie stood at the attic entrance, his eyes gleaming like a gambler's. Somehow, the leper was standing again.

"Some people should be coming over," Charlie said. "You like that? A little company? Nellie's not too thrilled. Never is though, not easily at least." Charlie paced around the room, looking out the attic window for moving lights. They would come. He knew they would come.

"I don't know what her problem is. Uses up money and then hollers at me. She won't say it but I know it. Heh-heh. I know it. Doesn't want people around. Not that she ever did. I try to be a good husband. Am. Am. But I can't control her. She can't even control herself. Lord knows what she'll do if she gets hungry while one of these men is over."

The leper had no words of wisdom.

Light flashed through the attic window. Charlie turned, his face aglow. "Here here here," he said, and left the leper alone. He bounded down the steps and when he reached the bottom, Sandy called to him from the second floor. She asked if she could use the cell phone to take a picture of the leper and put it on the internet.

"Absolutely not," Nellie said. Charlie regarded her from the opposite end of the room. His stomach dropped—he thought he might look down and see that it had slipped out his asshole in a mess on the floor.

He wiped sweat from his upper-lip and looked at Sandy up on the landing. "Not yet," he said. "Some people might not react too nicely."

A crowd of shadows was pooling on the front porch. Nellie moved to his side of the room, her face ill-looking, her eyes withdrawn.

"I don't want these men in this house," she said.

"Then invite the girls too," Charlie said. "I want everybody around, I want everybody to see this."

"I want nobody in this house," she said. Her voice was cracking, her face with it. "Not them, not it. And if you keep this up, not you either."

Charlie looked at her, a smile clinging to his face like a water droplet on the edge of a leaf. "You pay one bill and you can kick me out, how about that."

"You never wanted to help me."

"My mother worked in that warehouse her whole life and never complained of an ache." He turned to the cloud gathering at the door and a great smile lit up his face. "Come on in, come on in, come on, come on." The men came in, a dozen or so, and some of them were trailing their wives, even a few kids. Voices filled the air. The house was alive with lights and sounds in a way that Charlie could never remember it being.

"Some damn joke, I bet."

"Bet he's got his little one tied up with a bunch of make-up and a Halloween costume on."

"What do you think it is, Reggie?"

"Why Tess, don't you look so grown. A spitting image of mom and dad."

The eldest daughter was standing in the dining room, apart from the crowd. She did not respond to Miss Peggy's compliment, or remark, or whatever it was, only watched the crowd in their living room grow brighter, louder, larger. They glowed like people in a movie, hummed like the ones that showed people dancing in a school gym or a barn or a city ballroom. They had gathered for the man that her dad had bought.

"Upstairs, upstairs, upstairs!" Sandy yelled from the second-floor landing. "What're you waiting for?" Her stubby legs turned and she bounded up and out of sight. The humming and the glowing turned to buzzing and beaming, something like warmth coming off of all these people, and Charlie gathered the crowd with a laugh and a jab and they all marched up the steps, a band of revellers.

Tess and Nellie remained downstairs, a taut wire of silence holding them together as they stood at opposite ends of the room, each catching glance of the other. "Some ice cream?" Nellie said at last.

They ate at the kitchen table from old plastic bowls. The ceiling bore a pressure down on them that they had never felt before. The walls squeezed them until they thought they might burst. All things were silent but the night bugs skittering beyond the screen windows.

They'd expected noise. A hoot and holler, stretches of gasps at the start and strings of voices after. There was nothing. Nellie got all jittery, her hands trembling. "I think I'll go for a walk," she said.

"What will I do?"

Nellie looked at her daughter. Thin bones and thinner skin. She had been like that once, maybe still was, and Charlie too though he'd never admit it, and she felt bad thinking about it, felt quite bad and quite fearful for everything, for everything they had passed down, all the thin skin and brittle bone and wanted to change all of it but didn't know how, so she did what she knew how to do and hoped dismally that some mark of pain or deep wound would open a road for her daughter that might somehow wind its way towards a strange understanding or sense of goodness.

"You're a big girl," Nellie said with a nod. "And I can't stay in this old house one more second."

She left out the backdoor, leaving their bowls on the table. Tess cleaned them. She put away the plasticware and spoons. She went out on the front porch and looked at the darkness of the night. Stars twinkled and they made her angry. The world moved around her, beyond her control, and the stars twinkled and never changed. There were things she didn't understand that she asked the night about. She screamed them into the dark.

Wind bent tall stalks of grass and the world murmured an answer she couldn't understand.

The warm middle of summer turned into the burnt edges of August. Things were dying in the heat. Grass and plants going brown, no wetness from the sky above.

Charlie found himself smiling all the time; through thin meals and one-sided conversations with his wife and daughters. Sandy indulged him, obstreperous as ever, but Nellie and Tess kept to themselves, distant as the promise of rain. That was ok. Party-poopers anyway. They didn't ask and they didn't want to hear. That was ok.

The leper ate. Charlie learned this after the first few days when he heard it sobbing groggily and pounding on the floor. Things were tight. He gave him a bowl or two of water every day, some bread and butter and maybe some old leftovers, if any remained, every few days. Charlie would not stay to watch him eat.

And the leper deteriorated. Things stuck out from him and he lost parts. He sat more than he stood, and his colour grew mouldy and dripped off of him in endless globs of sweat and puss

from the sores and bulbs that covered him like festering mildew, puddling around him and never drying up. The heat, the endless heat, seemed hell-bent on tearing his skin from his flesh until even that would be gone, leaving only bone and shadow.

He began to lose his teeth. The bread and butter turned to watery oatmeal. He arranged the fallen teeth around him in a protective circle.

Despite these things, or maybe because of them, the men and women from town came over once, maybe twice a week. Didn't want to overdo it by pushing their luck or risking the novelty of the thing. Nellie was good enough—she'd make some comments as they gathered out on the porch but they were fewer every time, and then she'd go off to the kitchen or the basement, leaving some time later. Tess would disappear. He never knew to where.

Then they'd all gather in the attic, sit Indian-style or maybe a few brought some fold-out chairs while others stood under the eaves and leaned against the walls. All looking at the leper. The light up there had grown dim from overuse but Charlie didn't change it. The shadows, the colours, the mess of the leper—they added to it. You could see things in him that you otherwise couldn't. Questions suggested themselves that otherwise wouldn't.

It was a funny thing when people showed up. Charlie thought of it like a ritual. Yeah, a couple nights a week people would be sitting on Judd Spitkow's porch and they would all be thinking about it and most nights no one would say anything, but when the crickets were itching in a musical way and the cicadas were humming with endless abandon like a chorus of banshees out in the dark of the woods someone might speak up and someone else might concur and eventually the seats and sills and floorboards would creak and voices would call the names of people sitting anxiously by open windows and engines would cough into life, boots and shoes and barefoot feet shushing through the tall grass, and people would make their way up the hill.

They would find themselves gathered in Charlie's living room, the lights bright there, the air calm but expectant, and then would move up to the second floor, the conversation growing thinner, the voices more hushed, the light not as abrasive, and then, like pilgrims coming to a shrine, their heavy and graceless feet would carry them up the pull-down steps to the attic all soft and silent and their voices would die away and everyone would take up their position. Charlie would open the windows for smokers to blow smoke out of, and people might have a beer or an unmarked bottle of some unknown concoction, and here they would gather like worshippers, like theatregoers, like prison guards and prisoners the same, no one in, no one out, like lost people who had found something.

And with shifting, unfocused eyes, they would catch sight of it after being in silence for some minutes, as if they were unsure why they'd gathered in such a strange place as this. They'd see a lump in the shadows, a flash of flesh or bone, or maybe the smell of rot would drift into their nostrils and draw their eyes forward.

Judd Spitkow was apt to speak first, his voice low and grumbling, and he would say something like, "Can't sleep most nights. Never really could, always had that trouble. Dad had it too. But especially since coming here. Not a bad thing though, I can't complain. I don't get shivers when

I'm sitting up in bed and thinking about him standing here in the dark, leaking and crumbling like a ruin. But I get an awareness and that gives me a fright. Life stops flying past like fast-food joints out on 611. I sit up in bed and it's like the car rolled to a stop while I was asleep behind the wheel. See everything really good for once. I hear the bugs again, smell the age of the bedroom. It's like coming to out of a fog. I'll even wake the dog and ask him what he thinks. I don't want to know where he's been or what he's done. I want to know what he's doing right then and there, what he's thinking, what he is."

"He's a leper," someone would say. "Isn't he?"

Judd would shake his head and say, "More to him than that. Just don't know what."

Like an invitation to join a conversation, Judd's words opened up the floor. People pondered out loud. Sometimes, the kids would play with him, dare each other to crawl as close as possible without touching him. One night, Sandy spoke up when it was her turn to crawl and she said he was the boogeyman. A few people chuckled and Miss Peggy asked her why she thought that.

"He is. I see him standing in my closet at night. And I hear his breathing through the ceiling sometimes and moving overhead. And he's really gross looking." Other kids laughed and the adults shook their heads with smiles on their faces. "And in Sunday school," Sandy said, "they taught us that the leper was a sin. They'd done something bad and that's why God made them that way and why Jesus healed them. That's how the boogeyman got to be his way. I know it. I know it!"

The leper had nothing to say. His eyes were cast down and his body leaned this way and that.

Miss Peggy smiled. Sometimes she could be a sweet old thing. "I see him in my closet at night too, honey. But I don't think he's the boogeyman. I think he's a relic from the past. Look at all the pockets on those old clothes, the holes in his body. He's got everything you've ever done in there. Every bad thing. After Theodore died, I found out that, well, he hadn't been entirely honest with me. One night I got to thinking of it so bad that I hustled his old Buick down to the cemetery, found his headstone, and kicked it. Kicked it and kicked it and kicked it until it fell over and struck the headstone behind it and cracked down the middle, splitting in two. God...they called me the next day and said he must've had a real bad enemy. God...and now I see him at night. Standing next to the closet or the dresser. Shoulders all drawn up, arms hanging low. Looks like a real boogeyman but he's just my Theodore. And I say, 'I'm sorry Theodore,' over and over and cry into my pillow and then he goes away."

Fred Gabriel shook his head, said, "He's just another lost soul. You know what I mean. Bet he's been revived about a thousand times. Bet every time he loses another piece of his body, another piece of his soul. As he should. Some nights I want to stare at him and ask him a thousand questions, others I just want to shout and scream at him. Beat him senseless. Lost soul is all he is."

"He's a demon!"

“A ghost!”

“A squonk! Look at those tears!”

And so it went with the usual suspects until Sheila Hudson, young widow she was, said something interesting. “He’s like a melting pot,” she said, “all frozen solid and then carved like a living statue. You see how he’s always losing parts but never falls apart. Always changing. Should be dead, right? Dead a thousand ways over. He’s older than the oldest tree but gets reborn every second. He picks up pieces and shifts them around, adds new ones. Every fleck of hair and dead skin we’ve left up here is a part of him now, you can see it. He’s all of us. Pieced all together and I can see it all! When we were kids, me and my brother found a blind fox pup out in the woods. He was...I don’t know what he was but he was mewling and padding around and you could see there was nothing for him. He must’ve heard us come up because he starts howling near us like we have food or something, like we were his mother, and Michael said, ‘We gotta kill him,’ and I said no, and he said ‘fine, let him starve,’ and he started back and the pup kept crying so I called him and he said he would do it if I gave him a dollar so I gave him one and he picked up a stone and bashed the pup in. I don’t know how many times. Dropped the stone and walked away. I couldn’t see much left of the pup but I could see his eyes. Milky, irises floating like black bobbers. Knowing nothing, not even understanding what the world he was born into was. That it contained anything but blackness and want and some terrible pain. How can you look at that leper and not see it in his eyes? I see those blind fox eyes. I see all that not-knowing. Why’ve even been born at all...”

There was a long strip of silence as people wiped sweat from their brows and searched the leper over for their own flecks of hair, their own dead skin. They were wrapped in dreams. An older woman in the back muttered the name of a boy and her husband wrapped an arm around her and they wept quietly.

The leper sat without grace and without acknowledgement and he leaned back and forth, dipped this way and that, swayed as if he was divining spirits.

Charlie Ray caught some glob of phlegm in his throat, cleared it, and rocked the rocker with the padded cushion he sat on and said, “I like that. But I don’t just see what was. Or is. I see whole worlds in those holes in him. Endless chances. You know. I see what could’ve been or what could be. I see everything that could be someday else. That could be better.”

People hummed. He was thinking of Nellie, of Tess and Sandy too, of the small world as he knew it, but of Nellie most. He saw her sitting where the leper was. Falling apart, covered in empty spaces. She threw it all away, didn’t she? She chased after stardust. He looked at the leper dipping and leaning and felt nothing but anger.

By the time the stars came out in full brightness, the people of Cellarton had returned to their homes. Sandy was skipping rope on the front porch. Charlie could not find Nellie or Tess. He was watching TV in the living room when he heard Sandy call out, “Daddy’s going to be so mad at you!” and he got up and went out on the porch. Tess’s face floated forward from the darkness. Before she could reach the steps, he bounded down, grabbed her arm, and ripped her forward.

“Nothing,” she said, “I wasn’t doing nothing.”

“The hell you go off to without telling me, leaving when we have company.”

“I was with mom!” Her face was pale and stricken in the harsh porch light. It was a long and ghostly face.

The still air stretched the screams of night bugs across the sky. “Where is she?” Charlie said.

A shock of hair fell across her face and she pushed it away, unable to look at him.

“Up against that wall,” he said.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“We were talking, I just wanted to talk to her.”

Charlie pulled her up the steps and pushed her against the front of the house, spread her arms and legs. She was wearing cut-off jeans and an old t-shirt. With two junk-car hands he frisked his eldest daughter, sweat pouring off him and bees going mad in his stomach. Sandy was laughing at first but went silent as Tess began to cry.

“We were just talking, we were just talking.”

When he was finished searching, Tess was standing naked on his front porch. Light shone down hard, darkness all around them. Cicadas and crickets went wild in the deep stillness. Her shorts were trashed, the pockets turned inside out and slashed open with his pocket knife. Her underwear and bra lay in a heap. He held her ragged shirt in one fist.

He had found nothing.

In a fit of anger, he forced her to reveal both arms and legs and he searched her all over and still found nothing. Charlie was pale. He was frightened and ill and sent Sandy into the house to wash-up and go to bed. “Don’t ever make me do that again,” he said to Tess, and went inside.

The house fell dark and silent shortly thereafter. Charlie lay on the bed in starlight that slanted through the window. The fan hummed with constant low energy, blowing air into his face. He did not think. He could not allow himself to think. His mind raged over things it would not think of. He felt the shame of waste—wasted lives all around and it all felt so worthless.

Sleep came over him with all the stillness of clouds crawling across the moon. It was fitful, and he heard sounds of footsteps and low-voices and the creaking of the house in moments of anxious half-sleep where his eyelids drifted open and his teeth ground together. A shape stood

over him at one point. A long and towering thing that looked down with an empty face and a hollow body.

“King,” Charlie muttered, and fell back asleep.

He awoke when the stars had shifted and Nellie was getting into bed next to him. He felt the knots and bones of her thin and child-like body as she adjusted herself under the covers, and he felt disgusted that he had ever wished to share a bed with her.

He got up on one elbow and looked at her. She was facing the window.

“Please tell me where you were,” he said. The disgust had been tempered when he’d looked at her. It was replaced with anger and something like envy.

She did not respond.

“Where did you take Tess?”

Nothing. Disgust filled him again. He couldn’t believe her. Couldn’t believe himself.

“You’re going to look like that damn leper in a few months’ time,” he said, and turned back on his side and went to sleep.

It was a thud from overhead that woke him up not long after. He arose with his one ear bent to the ceiling. Nellie tossed in bed. Charlie stood, paused, and shuffled to the door. As he turned the knob and the old latch clicked, he heard Nellie’s voice whispering from behind.

“What’re you doing, Charlie?”

Another thud overhead.

He looked up, then at Nellie. “I’m checking on him.”

“You don’t need to do that,” she said. Her voice sounded as if it might die out from exhaustion like a ragged engine. He could see little in the room, but believed that her eyes were not half-open. “I checked on him. He’s fine.”

“You checked on him?”

“Yes. Is that ok?”

“You don’t even like to talk about him.”

They were starved people. Yet the thinness that had devoured them left little room for secrets. They hated what they couldn’t hide. “You never feed him, Charlie,” she said. She crawled over the bed and sat on the edge, looking at him. Her eyes were more open than Charlie had thought,

her hands shaking as he felt them often do, her face as he saw it in his memory.

Another thud. The sounds of things tapping on the floor, too.

“He’s dying, you’re letting him die. He’s weak and he’s sick and he’s dying.”

“He was already dead.”

“He’s suffering. Can you imagine that?”

Charlie waited.

Thud and tap tap tap.

“I’m going up there.”

“Charlie no.”

“What’re you hiding now, Nellie?”

“I heard what you said when I went to bed. You think I’m going to be like him? You going treat me like you treat him too? Go ahead Charlie do it put another hole in me.”

He charged into the hallway and went to tear the attic steps down. As he grabbed the handle Nellie ran out and pulled him back by the shoulders and the steps came flying out, clapping and clacking, cracking him in the shoulder as he flung her off. All of them landed with a bang that shook the house and Charlie swore and scrambled to his feet as Sandy came out of the girls’ room and asked what was going on, her voice alien and lost.

“Sandy, you stay.”

“Charlie don’t do this.” Nellie stood and grabbed hold of Sandy, hugging her tight.

“I’m going up and if you try to stop me I’ll kick you down the stairs.” Tears were flying from his eyes as much as they were Nellie’s. His left arm was racked with pain and hung limp at his side. It wasn’t supposed to be like this, he thought, and anger flooded him, the blood of rage filling his face.

“Tess, don’t let him touch you!” Nellie yelled.

He clambered up the steps and through the hole and saw his daughter kneeling in the muddy light of the room’s far corner. He saw the splayed legs of the ruined leper behind her. The feet fidgeted and clapped on the floorboards. The leper spasmed and his body fell to the side, his head striking the floor. Thud. Tess reached for his head and lifted it in her palm.

“Don’t touch him Tess,” Charlie said.

She turned around. Her face was worn and grotesque in the dirty light. “Don’t touch him,” he said, “you touch his blood or puss and you’ll get it.”

Tess made no move. She stared. Her father was draped in shadow, hunched over, his long limbs hanging low.

“Drop him!” he screamed, and moved toward them. She huddled closer to the leper, propping his head against the wall as the shadow shambled towards them, grabbing things that lay on the floor before her. He charged her and grabbed the collar of her big sleeping shirt and yanked her out of the corner. She spilled on the ground and the things she was holding spilled too. Inside the now ruined circle of the leper’s teeth was food and water, but greater in number were darker things. Dark liquids and lighters and sharp objects he had never wanted to see. Things that haunted. Things that were of or for the devil.

His daughter had held them. They surrounded his king.

The leper sat against the wall. His jaw was slack; yellow and red liquids lurched out of his mouth. Blind fox eyes that seemed absent of anything. He breathed in sharp wheezes, louder than ever before, that pulsed with the rhythms of the cicadas and crickets singing in the chaos beyond the windows, in the darkness of the barren land. The song grew louder and pressed in on the attic.

“Killed him,” Charlie said. He was long and gaunt and torn into strips of shadow and light, his arms dangling like venomous snakes. “My king.”

Nellie came up the steps. Sandy was crying down below. “Dying,” Nellie said. She pulled up next to her eldest daughter. “Trying to help him. Trying to ease his pain. You were killing him Charlie and you didn’t care how he felt.”

“Couldn’t let me have one thing, could you.”

“You never listen to me.”

“Not one thing, not one blessed thing.”

“You never wanted to help anybody, you suffer for yourself.”

“You took him from me! You took him from me!”

The palace shook with his voice. His kingdom crumbled. Like some violent wind from the uncaring heavens, Charlie Ray came upon his family.

The Man Who Grants Wishes may not have been listening, but someone was, and sometime later, in the thick of that same dark night, the low-man came out of some hole in the world and appeared at Charlie Ray’s house at the top of the hill. Cellarton twinkled below in dreary porch-

light. They would be saddened to see these people go, but it would be much the same as always.

Hot wind blew off the fields, dry enough to sting his throat, carrying the smell of ash and ember, and so the low-man believed it was time to move on. Town was kindling, all burned up, now time to move on.

He knocked at the front door. He was not one to enter homes, bidden or not, but this seemed like something different. Bugs screamed in the night. Lights inside burned without purpose. He opened the screen door and walked in.

The living room was dark, and, he believed, undisturbed. There was light coming from the second floor. He went to it. In the upstairs hall, he walked through wreckage. Busted walls and broken floorboards. One of the steps leading to the attic was shattered. He stepped over it and climbed up.

The low-man never paid close attention to details. He stepped over things that disturbed him and went to the room's far corner. Squatting there over the shreds of something old and dead, wretched with filth and smelling of mould and blood, was something new and dying. There was a sad rope collar soaking in the mess of the floor. The new thing regarded the low-man with biblical fear as he stepped over a puddle and undid the fixings of the rope collar.

"I see you got it on you," the low-man said. He reached for his new stock's neck, but the thing recoiled.

"Chahhh-lee," the low-man said. "No other choice, have you?"

Charlie hesitated, and in that instant the low-man fixed the rope around his neck and tied it tight. Charlie pulled on it, slipped in a puddle, and landed in his filth. He could feel the dead meat of his skin bunching and numbing. Knots appeared on him and sharp pain drew in his muscles, turned his hands into claws, forced him to peel flesh from his bones in agony. Black holes appeared.

The low-man tugged on the leash. With pain, Charlie stood.

"Maybe we can find someone who will show you mercy, Chah-lee.

Charlie responded, his voice dazed, his head lost. "King," he said, and pointed to himself.

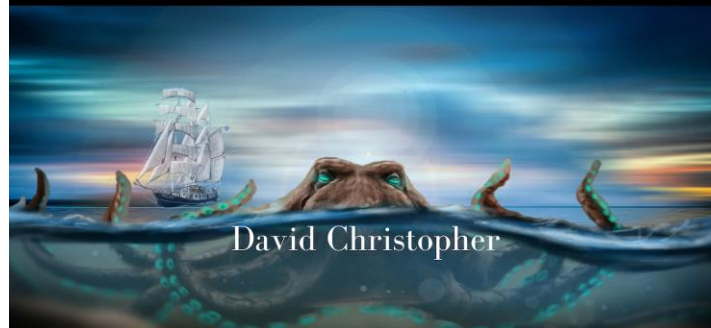
"Sure," the low-man said, smiling. "We will say that."

The low-man led Charlie out of the house, down the hill, and into the darkness of some new town.

THE END

GONZO PULP PUBLICATIONS
PRESENT

Long John Silver and the Squid-God of Lemuria



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FINGER COUNTING by Michael D Davis

Why was it that other kids picked on Olive Newberry? It could be that kids are kids and this was just a random act of malevolent childishness. However, anyone who knew Olive Newberry would certainly wager against this. You see the thing about Olive Newberry is she had one extra pinkie on her left hand and one extra pinkie on her right hand.

It was this small and unfortunate deformity that kept the fair fish away and drew in the vicious sharks for easy pickings. Darla Day, she was a bad one. One of those small town, school girl villains that are looked upon with princess-like appeal because she had enough luck to be born with a certain last name. Also, the type to be surrounded by mindless lookalike goons; I'm sure you know the kind.

Sure, Olive played with other kids, if a game needed a fourth or the teacher saw her skulking in the shadows of the gymnasium. But she didn't make a real friend until the first day of sixth grade. With her eyes red and her cheeks flushed from obvious crying the morning of, she saw Roland Ross; a boy with red eyes, flushed cheeks and a left arm that ended just above the elbow.

As she approached the one-armed boy her mind was flooded with thoughts of what to say. This proved to be pointless speculation because when she bobbed into the boy's line of sight he said, "Just leave me alone." That got things turning.

"Fine, if you're going to be rude," Olive said.

"Well, you were going to be mean."

"I was not."

"Surely you were, everyone is mean to the boy without an arm." His eyes were growing ever wetter as the pitch of his voice rose.

"You are more than wrong, boy. In this school, everyone is foul to the girl with twelve fingers." Olive put her hands on display and watched as the boy's face changed rather pleasantly.

"It seems like I don't have enough fingers and you have too many."

"It would appear that way, I'm Olive Newberry."

"Roland Ross. You can call me Ro."

That was pretty much all it took. They were like opposite sides of the same unlucky penny, bonded together by an overabundance and an apparent absence of appendages.

At lunchtime, they would sit together alone, talking. They talked about their likes, dislikes, books, movies and a few other concerns the average twelve-year-olds would chat about.

“I was only two when it happened. Mom says its dad’s fault and dad doesn’t say much of anything,” Ro said.

“It’s not like it happened on purpose.”

“That’s what I said but mom said he should have been paying more attention.”

“I was just born this way; mom says it makes me more special.”

“I could see that.”

“I certainly can’t,” Olive said.

Through the school days, their friendship grew like a flower in spring. However, as you may already have foreshadowed, where there’s light comes shadow. Darla Day and other alike, berated the two with daily insults, putdowns and unclever nicknames; where once they would have been forced to suffer alone, now, they had each other in times of attack.

It was Olive, with Ro behind her, who became the voice of the duo. When one would remark, “Here comes freak one and freak two.” Olive would snap back, “Oh, shove it,” or “you’re one to talk.” Comebacks she never would have had the courage to say if it wasn’t for Ro.

One Tuesday, after school was let out, and Olive and Ro started their days walk to the library, they were approached by Darla Day and her group. All four of them stood in a line barricading Olive and Ro’s beaten path.

Darla said, “Hey freaks.”

“What do you want?”

“Not to live in a world with freaks like you.”

“Just go away.”

“What are you gonna do about it?”

“Maybe I’ll touch you with my freak hands!” Olive shot out her hands and Darla jumped back with a screech.

“Ha, scared you.”

“Did not,” Darla composed herself with astonishing agility, “to think I was gonna be nice.”

“Why?”

“What?”

“Why would you be nice?”

“Because that’s the kind of person I am.”

Ro and Olive glanced at each other not too discreetly.

“My mother always says you can never have too many friends. So, I thought I’d make you two...friends that is.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Well fine, I was just trying to be nice. We were gonna show you something a-m-a-zing.”

“What is it?”

“Come and see.”

“I don’t believe you, Darla Day. I think you are just a mean, rotten girl that’s just trying to trick us.”

“That’s mean,” said Darla as she motioned for her mindless minions to encompass Olive and Ro.

“You’re gonna regret saying that.”

Although what Olive said was true she would come to regret her statement. At the current moment, however, surrounded and scared, Olive’s fleeting thoughts were mostly on the subject of escape. Sadly for Olive, she could not form a proficient plan. So, she just ran, full force, straight ahead. She was restrained quickly as Ro stood wide-eyed and still.

“What do you want, Darla?” Olive screamed fitfully.

“I want to be friends! Now come on.”

Ro and Olive were forced to follow Darla as she proceeded ahead. Where they went was a place only known as the Gilroy Kilroy house. A small abandoned shack of a shelter in which according to local scuttlebutt there had been several sightings of soulless spirits. Which most believed was poppycock. Olive, however, believed the stories to her core.

She shook and held back tears as she was led up the steep hill. As they ascended no one spoke. But with Ro’s only hand he squeezed six of Olive’s fingers and was comforted to feel her squeeze back. As she held his hand Olive pondered on all the nasty things Darla might do when they reached their destination and although fear swam through her veins beside the blood she tried her best to remain a figure of stony appearance.

The wood floors in the Gilroy Kilroy house screamed in pain with the fall of every foot, no

matter how light the step. Ro tightened his grip on Olive's hand and kept his head down as he entered. The room was dark and filled with previously nice furniture, overall flooding Olive with a savage feeling.

"This is our little... clubhouse," Darla Day declared.

"How... homey," Olive spit out.

"Yes...well," Darla ducked behind a decomposing couch and fished for something. "Now that we are all friends, we should play a game." She came out from behind the couch with a long rectangular box of matches, "How about heatwave?"

"I never heard of that."

"That's because I made it up."

"How do you play?"

"It's simple." Darla took out two foot long matches from the box. "We light these and both of us hold onto one as it burns down to our hands. Whoever drops their match first loses."

"I don't want to play."

"You play," said Darla, making her eyes into ice-cold slits of steel.

"Fine, but only one game, then me and Ro go."

Darla's face brightened instantly. "Yes, just one game."

Two quick strikes and the competition started. Both girls held their matches out in front of them for all to see. A trance-like stare overtook everyone in the room. Beads of sweat rolled down their skin as they watched the slow charring of wood.

The only person to rip their retinas away from the descending flames was Darla. She looked upon Olive with more fire in her eyes than any match could start.

As the flame forced its way forward on the path toward the pale porcelain skin of the girls everyone grew uneasy in anticipation. Olive refused to let go of the match even if it meant melting her fingers down to the bone. When the flame did begin to lick at them, Olive stayed deadpan as Darla twitched in pain.

"Are you alright, Darla?"

"Fine."

She attempted to blink away the pain but it wasn't working. So, darling Darla Day, with her free

hand, reached to the wall and tore off a long piece of peeling wallpaper. The aged paper lit up with surprising speed, and what did she do with this, you wonder. Well, she threw it. Not at the floor, or at Olive, but the burning paper did soar towards Ro.

Ro flailed his arms about as his clothing burned. Olive dropped her match turning towards the flaming boy. She stood helpless, screaming at the top of her lungs as Ro gyrated in agony. Her shirtsleeve caught light in a most accidental way from Ro's fiery movements. The flames spread up her sleeve and across her back which she had turned on Darla.

The soldiers of Darla's sick army had mind enough to run; something Darla herself was about to do. As she started to stride across the worn wooden floor something happened that I do not believe she expected.

A place on the floor henceforth to be known as the Spot broke open and took Darla Day's foot in its splintered teeth. The pain in her ankle and foot from beneath the broken boards did little to falter her in her attempt to escape. Darla ripped and pulled at her sunken leg but could not tear it from its wooden grasp.

I don't know if you're wondering about it, but I certainly am. Was it just a matter of coincidence and rotten boards, or was it the act of a ghostly resident? I certainly know Olive Newberry's opinion.

As Ro laid across the room lifeless, spreading flames, Olive not quite dead and not entirely alive but more in an undecided state stood in front of Darla. She looked up at Olive's sunken burning eyes and pulled at her leg more rapidly. I don't know if the Gilroy Kilroy house was ever haunted but it was that Tuesday afternoon.

THE END

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THE STRAW MAN COMETH by Jesse Zimmerman

Part Two: The Straw Man Continueth

From my vantage point here at the top of the library the one called Straw Man stands three times the height of an average man and at least four times as wide. His arms, barely contained in his furry jerkin, are as wide as I am. One of his allies, the short and squat green things, lurches out from the shadows behind. I see two more running towards the winding stairs that I had just climbed. They carry what look like iron clubs. The Straw Man grimaces as he glares up at us, and then flings his head, his straw-like hair leaping like a floppy mop, and he cries out: “Surrender! You’re surrounded!”

The Challenger looks to me and Fauna and asks: “You remember him?”

“He’s Rand,” I say, remembering the vision. “You threw him in the antidote.”

“I guess that’s why he’s huge now,” says the ranger, leaning over the rail. He then yells: “Rand! I’m glad you’ve hit the gymnasium! These two young’uns were just looking around! Let them leave and I’ll stay! Does we have a deal?”

“No!” roars back the Straw Man, crossing his meaty arms over his colossal chest. “I think not, Jim-Jim!”

“Jim-Jim?” Fauna asks at the Challenger’s side. He shrugs.

“Those two sisters in red and blue—I know them! I’ve been watching you lot the past few days! That blue one with the big owl eyes ‘specially! She knows things!”

My sister would be laughing really hard if this were any other situation. Both she and the Challenger raise their bows, Fauna aiming downwards between the rails while the Challenger points his right over the vine-covered edge. I am crouching, peering down at the balconies on all eight levels below and catching sight of the scurrying green bodies. This is bad.

“What are those things?” I whisper up at the Challenger.

He suddenly veers his bow, shooting loose an arrow straight at the third level of the library. Something zooms through the hallways by the balcony, one of Straw Man’s servants, moving straight into the path of the arrow. I see the thing, green and round, without eyes, noses or a mouth, only pointed ears.

Blonk!!

The arrow bounces off of it.

“Attos!” the Challenger shouts and I remember the big thing that killed his wife. These must be smaller versions.

“Impervious to arrows?” Fauna asks and tilts her bow downward more, and fires right at the Straw Man.

The arrow hits true, thudding hard into the great man’s chest.

He opens his mouth in a huge smile, showing big yellow and black teeth before reaching and crushing the arrow in his right hand. Straw Man slams his left fist into the nearest pair of desks, sending them crashing against the far wall of the lobby. Sister shoots a second arrow but the brute closes his mouth too fast and then ducks! She is a good shot but he is too fast!

“Rope!” the Challenger then yells.

Fauna flings her backpack on the floor and the ranger rips the thing open, pulling out our hemp rope. Earlier I mentioned that we had a few feet of rope – it’s actually 130 feet! I dash to the Challenger’s side, for the ranger is now tying one end around his torso in a knot. With my dagger I grab hold of the other end and promptly cut off four feet.

“It’s perfect now,” I tell him as I tightly tie this end to the rail.

He pats my shoulder heartily and I see a small smile on his unshaven face. “You guys run, just get out of here. Leave him to me! I have a really high dexterity score! Just go!”

“Ranger-boy!” Fauna shouts after flinging down a third and fourth arrow, both of which Straw Man dodges and laughs menacingly at, making the walls of the library shake a bit. “You know us better than that!”

“Let’s hope it holds!” he cries as he leaps off into the middle of the room, swinging his sword all the way down.

The Challenger slices as he flies downward to the Straw Man.

The sword misses.

The Challenger bounces up one third of the way, readying himself for another strike.

The metal bannister column the rope is tied to cracks in half!

Down goes our ranger friend with less momentum than anticipated, still managing a strike as he falls. Straw Man moves and the blade hits the outer side of his great left leg, spilling a thin trail of blood. The big man, making no reaction, leans over him, for our friend has smashed hard against the floor.

The Challenger scrambles to his feet, but Straw Man grabs hold of him, pulling him with one massive hand clenched around both of his legs. I make a terrified face. I look at my sister and see she’s made the same one. We both tear down the hall towards the stairs.

I make it first and start descending. On the eighth floor I see the big open doorway that says Delipha's Artefacts. I don't think the goddess of the sea can help us now. Seventh floor!

Fauna's rapid footfalls are right above me.

"Flora!" she calls as she emerges behind me and rushes to the edge of the balcony rail. "Those things are coming!"

"I need a better weapon!" I call after her, running into the chamber labelled Experimentation.

"Okay, okay!" I tell myself, using the sunlight that comes from the far wall to read the inscriptions on the numerous little columns that contain items. There are items here that I'd overlooked before. On one column I see a horseshoe shaped metallic item. I pick it up. It's a little heavy, just like a horseshoe. There are tiny black letters on the interior curve that read: Mighty Magnet. I know a bit about magnetic properties, but I can't figure out how to work the thing. I place it quickly in my tunic, the cold metal touching my skin.

I see the Killer Grass in the glass cube tank, the blades dormant once more.

"Flora! Look out!"

I turn about in time to see one of the green Atto thingies charging at me!

It must have been hiding, this round short thing half my height but thrice my width, with bulky arms reaching out toward me with thick hands. Two arrows fly at it from the side but break upon impact!

I shriek. I then turn around, grab the tank of grass with a big gasp, and I lift and then flip it over my head, twist my back in an arch, and in perfect timing flop the Killer Grass onto the Atto's big ball-shaped head.

The Killer Grass comes alive at once, screeching and churning, little tiny roars and hisses emitting in the frenzy. I only see green and yellow movement, followed by less and less of the Atto's head. The Killer Grass patch begins enveloping the shoulders next, tearing piece by piece through this metallic creature.

I run to my sis, giving the feeding Killer Grass a wide berth as I move. We two sisters stand now on the balcony, looking over the side. All feelings of relief vanish. The Challenger is knocked out on the floor and the Straw Man scoops him up in one hand and flings him over his shoulders. Sister loads an arrow, steps onto the rail with one foot, leans over—Straw Man looks up at us!

He grins. She fires. He runs.

And then the green Attos surround us, four of them all at once. I raise my hands, unsure of what to do. Sister aims for them next, but we know it's pointless. One of the Atto spits something at us, some greenish cloud of dust—and I suddenly feel dizzy and exhausted.

Everything goes black as I see my sister fall.

I have a brief dream. We are back at home at Silver Coast with Mother. Our quest is over in this dream and we sit at a long table full of food and drink and the Challenger is with us, his green-haired wife too, and others. There is joy before I wake up.

I feel groggy.

“Where are we?” I ask.

“In a birdcage,” says sister to my side and I see she's telling the truth. She is dangling her legs between the bars. This is no dream. We are in a birdcage with thin golden bars, the space between them too thin even for us small sisters to squeeze through. The cage, big enough to fit a pair of oversized eagles, hangs over cobbled stones. We are outside once more. I see the library towering over us. We hang from a tree. I see another cage the same size swaying at a tree just a few paces over from us.

“Challenger!” I call.

The ranger stands and rubs his head. I see a big gash above his brow. “They have our stuff,” he says. I see that he's right; our two knapsacks are on the ground, the items and food strewn about this area. There are four Attos. Two of them stand by Straw Man, who is about ten yards away from us, what looks to be an evening sun behind him, casting a long shadow of the library behind us. In this shadow, further away, another ten yards in an open square is something else, some machine. The other two Attos are there, seemingly inspecting this big thing.

“At least I am clothed this time,” says the ranger dryly. Our weapons are all gone. I see my dagger, their swords and bows, near the feet of the big enemy.

“Woken up, have we?” Straw Man sneers as he picks up the sword of the Challenger.

“Rand!” calls the Challenger from the other cage. “I've told you before! Your cow-meat is with me! Let them go! I don't even know these two weirdos!”

Fauna shakes her head slightly, but we both know he's trying to save us. “I don't know him!” she adds. “Me neither!” I multiply.

Straw Man shakes his head, sending his yellow stalks of lochs flinging. “You know me better than that!” he booms back. “No, I want revenge!”

“Revenge for what?” asks the Challenger. “You mates took my wife! What did you expect? And throwing you in that cauldron made you strong!”

“It made me ugly!” Straw Man roars.

“You were already ugly!” Fauna snaps. I want to smack the back of her head.

He darts his red wide face to us, but just giggles loudly and looks back to our friend. “You know, Jim-Jim. You were always my enemy! Since the first day our esteemed Academy took in a dirty orphan from the streets!”

“Rand!” the ranger yells in obvious annoyance. “I deserved the chance as much as anyone!”

Straw Man clenches his jaw, shaking his mighty head again. “No!” he retorts booming, waving his hands for a moment. “No! You do not deserve what belonged to me! What belonged to us, the sons of the big shifters, the golden born! It was we who built the campus, we who built Northsphere and filled it with riches!”

“Is that what this is about?” my sister interjects, standing up. “You’re vexed with our friend because he was given an opportunity when he was poor?”

“Oh! Oh!” shrieks the Straw Man, more than a hint of sadistic glee in his wretched voice. “So you do know him?”

“Rand! If I had finished my studies I would’ve helped Northsphere’s prosperity!” the Challenger says, shaking the birdcage, causing it to sway under the big tree branch.

Our captor crosses his arms, grins wide, and says: “Lies! You were a burden! And you, like all reformers, would have brought more orphans in to compete with golden born like me! Not anymore! You, like the reformers who now run the city, would have raised taxes on us golden born! All to support boys like you were! Poor boys! Bah! Lazy boys who refuse to take responsibility!”

“Rand, you represent me falsely to support your argument,” the Challenger says, sounding calmer as he speaks: “I was never lazy. I worked hard, far harder than you had to, yet you have this false picture of me that you’ve created. You shoot insults at me and make me out to be something I’m not for you to hurl arguments against! Enough! Now, let us go!”

He turns from us, laughing louder now, waving a hand carelessly to dismiss him. “You are in no position to make demands, lazy hand-out boy! Now, behold the instrument of my revenge! Upon Northsphere do I aim my malice!”

I shudder once the big thing down the way from us begins to hum loudly and then buzz like a loud intoxicated bee. Now I see it better. It is wide like a castle’s turret, made of iron; out of the box-like base sprouts a tube-like object that is three times the length of the rest of the thing. The bulky base of it is half the height of a village home. The side of it, from my viewpoint, is full of big cogs and circular notched gears the size of swine, all grinding and turning in a complicated system. I know not how it works, but the cogs clearly are charging it.

“This magical cannon!” roars Straw Man, pointing to it. He stands now halfway between our cages and the great weapon. “Aim for Northsphere, my Attos!” he turns to us. “Northsphere taxes me, taxed my family to pay for lazy street children to infest our institutions! No more!”

“You’re going to destroy our city?” our ranger friend shrieks, stamping his feet, swinging the cage wildly again.

“As soon as I know the magic word to fire, yes,” says Straw Man and he shrugs. “But I know not the word...but someone here does.” He turns to our cage and begins walking.

“I don’t know it!” Fauna yells as the Attos adjust the cannon, turning the great tubular barrel north. “Let us go!”

She stands up and swings the cage as well, the two cages making creaking noises, but both branches holding us. Fauna turns to me and quietly asks me if I know the magic word.

“No...and yes,” I whisper back. A look of fear overtakes her eyes.

“This is why I wanted to go home,” she says. “We’ve faced death too many times. I don’t want to lose you.”

I see the cage door open up behind her. An immense fleshy hand reaches it, moves past her, and grabs me by the shoulder. I move with it, out the cage and onto the ground. “Do not try to run,” the big man says over me, releasing me from his grip and I feel my legs weaken in his presence. “I can leap miles high and far. I will catch you.”

He closes the cage before Fauna can get out. She runs to the door and screams at him, curses him with all the worst words. I do not know the word that activates the machine, but I know I have read about it. Yes, I vaguely remember reading about the cannon now. How is he going to get me to say it if I don’t remember it exactly though?

We stand on the paved square in the shadow of the library. An Atto arrives at my side.

“Attos! You were created to serve mankind! This goes against your instructions! Rebel against Straw Man!” yells the Challenger, clearly trying to invoke some kind of paradox in their minds. It doesn’t work.

The Atto at my side has something in its hands. It gives it to Straw Man, who grins his ugly grin and raises the thing in his giant palm. In the glint of the setting sunlight I see a small blue slug that squirms in his hand. He lowers it, and then quickly grabs me by the right side of my head, pushing the slug to my left ear.

Fauna cries: “No! Leave her alone!”

I am terrified as I feel the slug slide into my ear canal and squeeze further in. My head feels wobbly now, but it soon goes away as I feel something else...something wonderful.

“Amazing!” I stammer. I feel memories coming back, early memories, seldom looked at memories, every memory! One moment I am in a crib with another baby, Fauna, with Mother looking over at us smiling warmly. The next moment I am in my first class and Fauna is bored at her desk while I am fascinated by our teacher’s lesson. And then every word, every map, every story; it all comes back to me at once! It’s like nothing I’ve ever experienced, knowing everything I ever learned at one moment, remembering every experience, good and bad, all at once. I feel like an immortal would feel!

“Tell me the words!” roars my captor. “The recall slug will remind you! I heard you, heard you talk of this! Tell me, or else your sister will pay!”

I snap from my trance. I look up at him and say: “Caraborus Teratilisolika!”

Straw Man laughs like a maniac and repeats the words loudly in the direction of the giant cannon. The weapons cogs and gears suddenly speed up. It is charging.

“Oh no!” I hear the Challenger.

“Flora! We can’t let all those people die!” my sister cries to me.

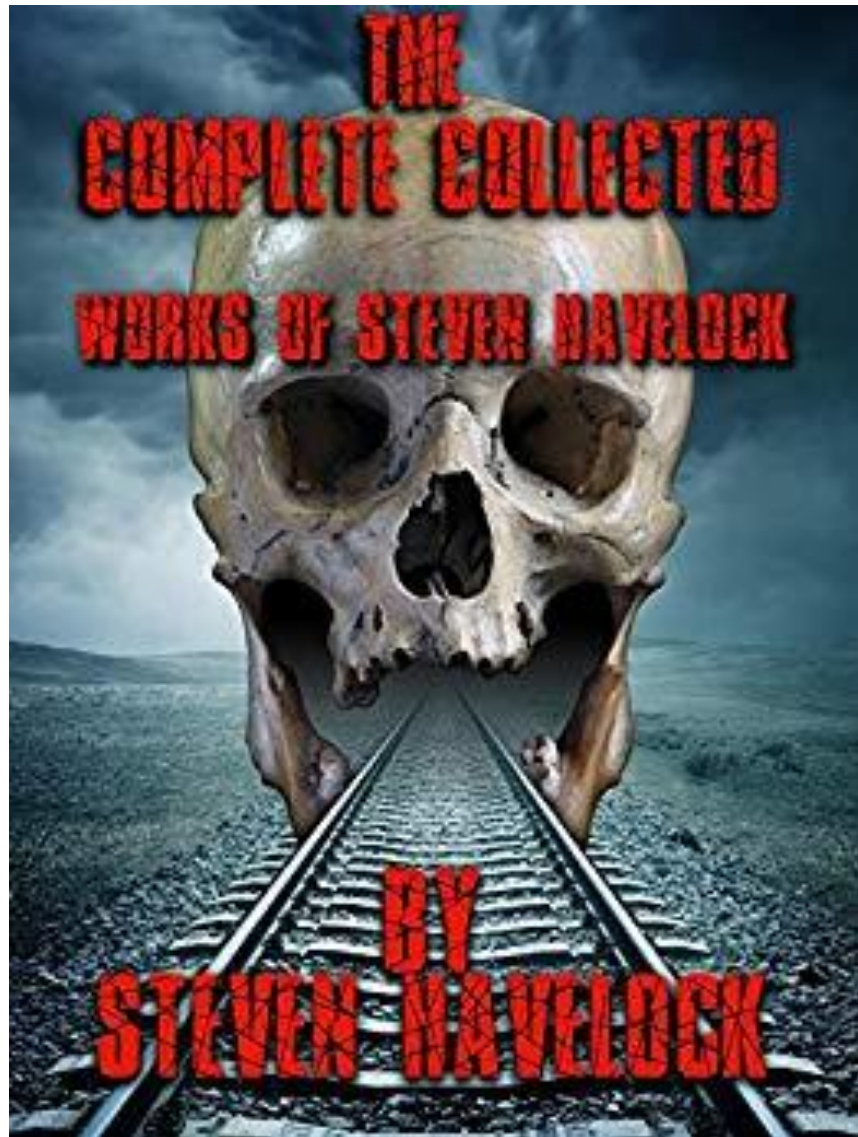
The words, they had just come out. I was so scared, so disoriented. I regret it immediately. I remember things; remember the maps I used to examine in the library back home. I see that the cannon is pointed north towards Northsphere. I recall that the Killer Grass lies to the south and east from here. The tower, I know the words that can activate all the items in the library.

The gears and cogs of the cannon are moving. The Straw Man turns his back to me, barks orders at his Attos, and then I get an idea. I have to move quickly. It’s not guaranteed to work, and even if I can save Northsphere it’s very likely we three will end up dead.

I look to Fauna. She grabs the bars of the cage, the look of terror and sadness marking her face. The Challenger wants to break free, wants to stop Straw Man. I turn once more and see that the Straw Man is waving his hands, laughing as the cannon readies to fire.

I take a deep breath and reach...

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK (FOR REAL THIS TIME)...



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Now they were under way, Yek-Zerab rose from the control panel where he had been hard at work, stretched, and crossed over to where Kursaal and Aajika stood together.

‘Get back,’ Kursaal rapped, and Aajika covered him with her stolen vril lance.

Yek-Zerab raised his hands in a friendly gesture. ‘I’m hurt,’ he said simply. ‘You think I’m mad enough to believe I can prevail against you?’ He looked straight at Kursaal as he said this. ‘I can see you have complete control of the situation.’

Kursaal frowned. ‘That is right,’ he said shortly. ‘Now go back to your place.’

Yek-Zerab stretched again. He looked over at Beb-Awer, still intent on flying them over the canopy of jivnik trees, then at the frightened Venusians sitting in the corner of the cabin closest to the door. ‘My work is done,’ he said, ‘until you wish to land, when I will be necessary to help my colleague take us down. For now, this atmosphere craft only requires a pilot to fly it. Don’t be afraid of me. There’s nothing I can do. You outnumber and you outgun me.’

‘Get back to your place,’ Kursaal repeated. He didn’t trust this Terran.

‘As you say,’ Yek-Zerab replied, but he made no move to obey. ‘I, ahhh, couldn’t help overhearing your words before,’ he added. ‘So you hope to make yourself emperor of Venus?’

Kursaal flushed and looked uncertainly at Aajika. He had no idea that his words had been audible to the others. ‘I can use this airship to make my tribe more powerful,’ he said.

‘Of course, of course,’ said Yek-Zerab. ‘You’re a man of destiny. And if you make your tribe more powerful, that will make you more powerful, yes? You could have all the best hides and spears, all the women you want.’

Aajika lowered at the Terran. Kursaal looked from her to Yek-Zerab.

‘All I want is to defeat the Deathcaps and all others who would attack my tribe,’ he said finally.

‘And you will use the atmosphere craft to do this,’ Yek-Zerab said. ‘It will give you the edge on your competitors. I can see that you do have it in you to become Venusian emperor. You can do anything you desire, have any power you want. You can take this girl as your queen, even if she is your sister.’

Kursaal looked strangely at him. ‘She is not of my own clan,’ he said, ‘but custom dictates that she cannot be mine for she is too close in blood. She is of my Tribe. I can only mate with a she of another tribe.’

Yek-Zerab shook his head. 'On my world you would not be barred from such a mating,' he said. 'And you need not be in your own world. You can make your own laws and customs.'

'You must help me,' Kursaal said, framing the request as if it were a command. 'You have no option,' he added. 'As you say....'

'Indeed, you outnumber us and outgun us,' said Yek-Zerab. 'We have no option but to do as you wish. And so we will. Now, where do you wish us to go? Our supplies of orichalcum must be renewed at some point or else our vril will diminish and the rays that keep us aloft will weaken. In the meantime, tell me where you wish to go and my colleague and I will plot a course. Or do you simply wish to soar the Venusian skies on a joyride?'

Kursaal couldn't understand the man. His words suggested he had accepted his position as an abject slave, but his manner betrayed an innate arrogance. He believed himself to be better than the Venusians. He treated them as if they were nothing but clever animals. But he was at their mercy. Control of this airship would make Kursaal emperor of the planet.

'We fly to the Crag,' he said simply.

'Precisely,' said Yek-Zerab. 'And where would that be? I'm a stranger to your planet, remember.' He called over to the pilot. 'The Crag, Beb-Awer? Do you know the location?'

'I'd hoped our lord and master the emperor of Venus here would give us the coordinates,' Beb-Awer answered, eyes intent on the viewport.

Kursaal saw that they were reaching the edges of the swamp now. Fog hung jivnik trees swayed beneath them, and beneath them stretched the unwholesome waters. But up ahead, the ground began to rise, and he saw the first outliers of the mushroom forest. Gazing into the misty distance, he saw rank upon rank of blue-grey mountains vanishing into the haze, and knew them to be the mountains that rose to the north of his tribal territory. The Crag lay somewhere between the two.

'Over there,' he said. 'Down there,' he added. 'In the mushroom forest.'

Yek-Zerab drew closer to them. He peered at the misty land below. 'What exactly are we looking for, your highness?'

Kursaal's brows lowered again. He didn't like the man's tone. Something suggested a lack of respect, for all his fine words.

'A cliff,' he grunted. 'Rising out of the mushroom forest. Caves at its foot. We can land there.'

'I think I've seen it,' remarked Beb-Awer, 'on a flyby,' he added.

Kursaal remembered the airship that had passed over when he was hunting the face-horn, and glowered suspiciously at the pilot.

‘We must keep our eyes open for it,’ said Yek-Zerab. ‘Both of you, help me. You know what you’re looking for.’

They crowded round the viewport.

‘What about Wanii and the others?’ Aajika said, indicating the frightened ex-slaves still cowering on the far side of the cabin. ‘They can help.’

Yek-Zerab shook his head hastily. ‘No,’ he said. ‘If we all crowd over into the nose of the atmosphere craft, it could send us into a dive. You don’t want to crash into a swamp, do you?’

Aajika shook her head nervously, and turned to peer down at the landscape below. She stood close to Kursaal. So close, Kursaal could have embraced her. But it was not the time for that, nor could he very well show his affection for her in the presence of other members of the Tribe.

They reached the edge of the swamps. Now the mushroom forest was below them. As Kursaal looked out for the Crag, he heard a strange noise from the other side of the cabin. A swishing noise. He had heard it before. When? That was it, when Beb-Awer had opened the cabin doors.

Yek-Zerab turned and looked across the cabin.

‘Awake at last, gentlemen,’ he said loudly, as the sound of footsteps came from the doorway. ‘Please,’ he told the Venusians, ‘don’t struggle. I think you’ll find that you must resign yourselves to being our prisoners again.’

Kursaal and Aajika tore themselves away from the viewport to see Wanii and the other slaves surrounded by more Terrans, who were menacing them with vril lances.

‘Where did they come from?’ Aajika hissed.

‘They must have been hiding in another cabin,’ Kursaal muttered, gripping hold of his chert dagger. ‘I should have searched the place. I knew there was a bigger crew.’ He had seen them when they went over.

‘They were sleeping, as it happens,’ said Yek-Zerab, overhearing the conversation. ‘Only Beb-Awer and I remained awake during the sleep period. I was on watch when I saw your hulk approach the slave pens...’

‘What’s been going on here?’ blustered a broad chested man with a brass pshent on his head and a viridian cloak. ‘I thought we were negotiating with the Venusian lagoon dwellers.’

‘Matters have changed, Captain,’ said Yek-Zerab calmly. ‘While you were slumbering, we have been hijacked. May I introduce you to Kursaal of the Crag Folk? We are flying to his cave dwelling, it seems.’

‘I think not,’ bellowed the Captain. ‘We’re going straight back to the lagoon village.’

‘The Deathcap settlement has been destroyed,’ Kursaal said, ‘the slaves have escaped. Drop your weapons, or we will shoot your pilot.’

‘Don’t be a fool,’ Beb-Awer cried out. ‘If you do that, we’ll crash.’

‘Aajika,’ Kursaal said. Her face grim, the girl levelled her stolen vril lance at Beb-Awer, whose pale face turned paler.

‘This farce has gone on long enough,’ said Yek-Zerab, showing impatience for the first time. ‘If you kill Beb-Awer, you kill us all. You stupid savages! This is not a game...’

While he had them distracted, the Terrans charged forward. Aajika cried out, and fired the vril lance, hitting the overhead, which exploded, showering sparks.

Yek-Zerab tried to seize the vril lance. Kursaal turned and thrust the chert dagger at him, but it broke on his lunula. Nevertheless, Yek-Zerab fell backwards, sprawling across the deck. Aajika fired again, and this time she hit Beb-Awer full on.

With an agonised cry, the pilot tumbled from the chair, letting go of the controls as he did so. The deck of the airship lurched, slanting at a fifty degree angle towards the nose. The other Terrans staggered across the deck, followed by the ex-slaves, thrown forwards.

Their weight threw the airship even further off keel, and they plummeted through the misty air towards a channel choked with jivnik trees. Kursaal was flung back against the bulkhead, and he caught Aajika as she tumbled past. Together, they fell back against the viewport.

Screams and cries rang through the cabin. The airship was out of control. The burly Terran captain lashed out with his fists at hysterical struggling forms, trying to restore some sense of order. Kursaal saw Aajika’s sister Wanii fighting across the cabin towards them. Aajika shrieked something at her. By now the roaring of the out of control engines or whatever powered the vessel was so loud that Kursaal could hear nothing. He looked through the viewport. The land was hurtling towards them at unbelievable speed.

‘Kursaal!’

He spun round to see what Aajika was screaming about. The Captain had levelled his vril lance at him and even as he turned, fired. Kursaal was thrown to one side by the pitching and yawing of the deck but the vril beam fired straight and true, hitting the viewport where he had been standing.

It shattered at once, and howling winds ripped through the cabin, knocking from their feet everyone who remained standing. Aajika clung to the bulkhead, staring at Kursaal in confusion. He scrambled to his feet, seized her by the wrist and hauled her with him as he climbed out through the shattered viewport. Realising where he was going, she struggled frenziedly, but he

turned, cuffed her across the head, and slung her dazed form over his shoulder. The freezing wind roared around him. His nostrils were filled with the stink of the swamp.

He clung to the hull, hair fluttering like a banner, teeth bared in defiance against the wind. Then he leapt to the side, plummeting towards the swamp far below.

Clinging to Aajika as if she was a symbol of life itself, he whirled downwards like a leaf in the wind, crashing through the jivnik trees and hitting the murky waters. The splash that they made was drowned out by the roar of the airship as it belly flopped into the swamp waters a quarter of a mile from their position.

Still holding Aajika, Kursaal kicked up with his legs and broke the surface again, treading the caustic water. Aajika came to. Clinging on to him, she watched as the airship ploughed through the swamp, smashing down jivnik trees as if they were saplings.

‘Wanii...’ she panted hopelessly. She clutched at her head. ‘Why did you hit me?’

Kursaal gave her a baleful look. He swam to the nearest solid ground, climbed out, and crouched in the bank waiting for her to join him, she did so reluctantly, gazing round her at the writhing mist that now obscured their vision of the crashed airship. She lay on the withered grass panting and gazing warily at him.

‘Well?’ she asked when she regained her breath.

‘I struck you because you panicked,’ he said. ‘You were out of your mind with fear. I knew that if we remained in the airship we would crash. So I thought it better to hazard a jump.’

She softened. ‘You saved us,’ she said, drawing closer and gazing into his cold green eyes. ‘You saved me.’ He nodded.

‘I did,’ he said. ‘And now the slavers are dead and gone, with luck.’

‘What of Wanii?’ she asked. ‘And the other slaves of our Tribe? You left them behind.’

Kursaal growled. ‘I could not take all of you, girl!’

She said nothing for a while. Silence hung over the swamp. The airship must have sunk, or reached a bank that had stopped its progress.

‘Thank you,’ she said at last. ‘But we must see if Wanii still lives.’

A plume of smoke drifted to the sky above the crushed and mangled jivnik trees as they jumped from tussock to tussock. The swamp was deathly silent, apart from a distant crackling sound. Kursaal followed Aajika, but he had little hope that her sister still lived, or any of the other slaves. When he had leapt from the airship with Aajika in his arms, he had no thought for anyone other than the she he loved. If Wanii was dead, he would be heartbroken. But at least Aajika and

he both lived.

What would they do now? Return to the Crag? Much had changed since he had departed with his fellow warriors of the Tribe. Had the Deathcap tribe been wiped out, or had some survived? They would be weaker now, if they did. But so would the Crag Folk. They had fled from the fight, and even Kursaal had rescued little from the disaster. All his hopes had vanished with the airship into the caustic waters of the swamp. Unless the airship had survived the crash, and even then, he had no hope of piloting the vessel himself. And if they still lived, Yek-Zerab and his companions were unlikely to offer assistance.

They came out of the trees to see a wide scar cutting through the marsh, and into the drylands of the mushroom forest. And there, in the shade of a great mushroom, half buried in mould, was the wreck of the Terran airship. Smoke billowed from its hull. It was silent, there was no sign of life.

Aajika halted, and Kursaal stood at her side. He gazed at her. The girl was weeping quietly.

‘Do not cry,’ he urged her. ‘Some may have survived.’ He put a heavy arm round her slender shoulders and drew her close. She clung to him, nestling her head against his brawny chest for comfort.

‘Do you really believe anyone could survive that wreck?’ she murmured. ‘They must all be dead.’

It began to rain. As the caustic liquid hissed down into the turbid swamp waters he bore to a sheltered spot beneath the roots of a large jivnik tree, above the level of the waters, and laid her down on the emerald moss, himself at her side. They lay together, bare flesh against bare flesh, arms wrapped round each other for comfort. His lips soon found hers and she was not unwilling.

Afterwards, they lay together, looking out over the churned up swamp, the smoking wreck of the airship still visible in the distance. The rain had ended before they reached the height of their lovemaking.

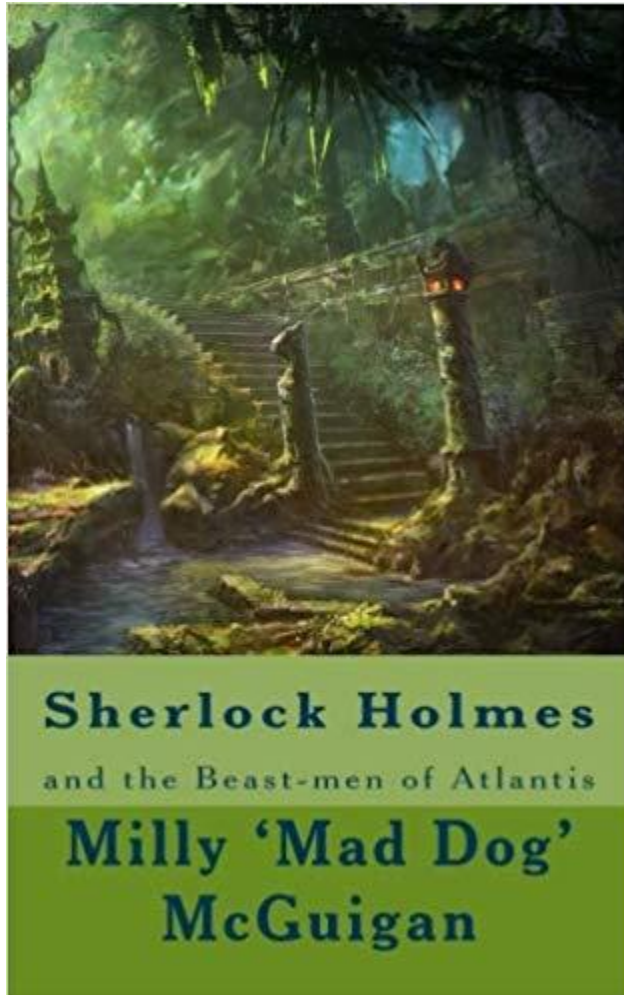
‘We must never speak of this,’ she told him firmly. ‘No one in the tribe must know. I love you, Kursaal, but it is not to be... You will find a she of another tribe, and I a man. That is the custom; that is how it must be. We are... too close in blood.’

He was about to answer when there was a sound of movement from above their little cave in the tree roots. He turned suddenly, and saw a small wet form silhouetted against the silver sky.

Aajika stiffened, pushed him away, rose, and trotted forwards.

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Thirty-Seven

Rat was relieved to see that Mud was not going to interrogate him about Lacey. So relieved was he that he let his guard drop.

“Yeah?” he asked Mud, Rat’s greed getting the best of him.

“Yeah,” Mud replied. “I got a few pounds for ya, if ya wanna take it off my hands.”

Ed came up at that moment, with Rat’s beer in hand.

“Y’all bein’ good boys and girls?” he asked, sliding Rat’s beer into the slots in the table to keep it from drifting off in the nearly weightless environment.

“Just dealin’ some drugs,” Mud said, laughing loudly. Rat offered his own weak laugh, while Illara and Hardy simply smiled. Everyone at the booth knew that it was bugged. Though neither Ed nor Rat knew that Mud, Illara and Hardy were, like themselves, also privy to that little secret.

“Just gimme my cut when yer done,” Ed remarked. He turned away and returned to his regular place at the bar while everyone at the table laughed at his quip.

Rat hesitantly picked up his beer and swallowed a mouthful. “How d’ I know you’re fer real?” he asked. “Is this shit any good?”

Mud answered him with a broad grin. Reaching into a hidden pocket in his jump suit, Mud extracted from it a pipe of carved onyx. Reaching into the same pocket a second time, he pulled from it a silver box holding several ounces of the drug called mud. The drug was thick and pasty, and it gave off a scent not altogether unlike a lady’s fragrance.

“Mm, smells nice,” Illara said. Hardy merely nodded his head.

Plunging the tip of his blade into the silver box, Mud slowly turned the knife, coating the point of it with the drug. He then scraped the mud, dark, brown and sticky, into the bowl of the pipe. He then handed it off to Rat.

“Don’t trust me,” Mud said to Rat. “See for yourself.”

Rat, after a quick glance around the barroom, put the pipe to his mouth and took a deep drag.

“Careful, friend,” Mud cautioned. “This shit isn’t for kiddies.”

Rat let the smoke out of his lungs with a cough.

“Yer right about that,” Rat said, with an expression that showed his appreciation. “I don’t think

I've ever touched anything like this. How much?"

"Depends," Mud answered with a salesman's smile. "How much you wanna pick up?"

Rat's eyes shifted and he stared at the ceiling as he gave himself over to contemplation.

"Well... I do know a few folk. For shit like this, I could prob'ly turn it over real quick..."

Looking back at Mud, he said, "I don't got the boodle to cover that up front. But if you can wait for maybe a hundred hours, I expect I could prob'ly turn a few pounds and get ya what ya want. Can ya do that?"

"See you for a few pounds?" Mud asked. He knew better, of course, than to make it too easy for Rat.

"I dunno 'bout that," he said. "I wuz kinda hopin' to move this stuff quick, on account of that deal on the ice. I wuzn't planning to stay here more'n a couple dozen hours."

Mud left his silver box on the table top, holding it down idly with his fingertips and leaving it open, so Rat could smell the scent of it, and see it just inches away from his grasp. Rat was of course powerfully and even painfully tantalized. He sucked on his gums while trying to think of some way to extract the mud without paying for it up front.

"Maybe I know some guys who can see me for those credits... maybe a couple hours," he offered.

"So, whatcha thinkin', my friend? You wanna bring your buddies to my ship, and do a pickup there?"

Rat thought that over for a bit. He was developing Mud as a connection, and one that promised to be a very solid connection. Rat did not like to share, and he preferred to keep this end of the business to himself. The less his buddies knew, the more profitable it would be to him.

"Tell yuh whut," Rat said, at last. "Lemme grab an ounce, maybe a couple, and I'll show 'em to my buddies, and we'll see what they wanna pay. Eh? Sound good?"

Mud gave his face a dubious expression.

"Mm... I dunno, friend. Sure, I got a bigger deal comin' at me. But I hain't gonna keep my ship runnin', handing out free samples to strangers. Lemme think on this fer a minnit."

Mud put his drink to his mouth and drained it, while keeping a thoughtful expression on his face.

He gave a quick and ambiguous glance at Illara and Hardy, who had remained silent, sipping their drinks and watching the discussion between the two reprobates. These two men, who already understood each other very well, hailed from a culture that was completely alien to both

Illara and Hardy. Even Illara, who had been head of Intelligence for Pink Security Systems, had never been so close to the rough and seedy culture these two men represented.

At the same time, it was good to keep Rat guessing. Mud's introduction had been intentionally vague. Who were these people hanging with Mud? Were they buying, selling? Bodyguards? Rat lacked the intuition or the insight that both Carter Ward and Mud shared. He sensed something about Illara and Hardy, but could not put his finger on what troubled him. Military? Ex-military? Were they cops of some sort? But even if they were, it would have made no difference on this far distant asteroid. The law did not reach here. So Rat shook that concern out of his mind. That Mud spoke so freely in front of the cameras that Ed had put in place around that booth suggested to Rat that Mud and his friends didn't know the lay of the land, which, Rat believed, gave him an edge over Mud.

"Okay," Mud said at last. I can risk a couple ounces on ya. It won't kill me," he said to Rat.

Rat grinned with teeth stained grey and black.

"So when ya wanna do this?" Rat asked.

"May as well finish up our drinks right now and get goin'," Mud replied, with another quick glance at Illara and Hardy.

"They comin' with us?" Rat asked, dubiously.

"They scare ya?" Mud asked.

"Nah, nah... not that... just..."

Mud didn't wait to hear the full answer.

Turning to Illara and Hardy, he asked them, "Whyn't you kids getcha another round? Rat and me will head back to my ship and I'll get my boy here want he wants."

"Fine with me," Hardy answered. "Ditto here", Illara said with another of her cold and beautiful smiles.

"How long we gonna be?" Rat asked.

"Aw, no more'n ten minnits," Mud answered.

"Okay, I guess that's good," Rat said. Mud slid his heavy body out of the booth and Rat did likewise.

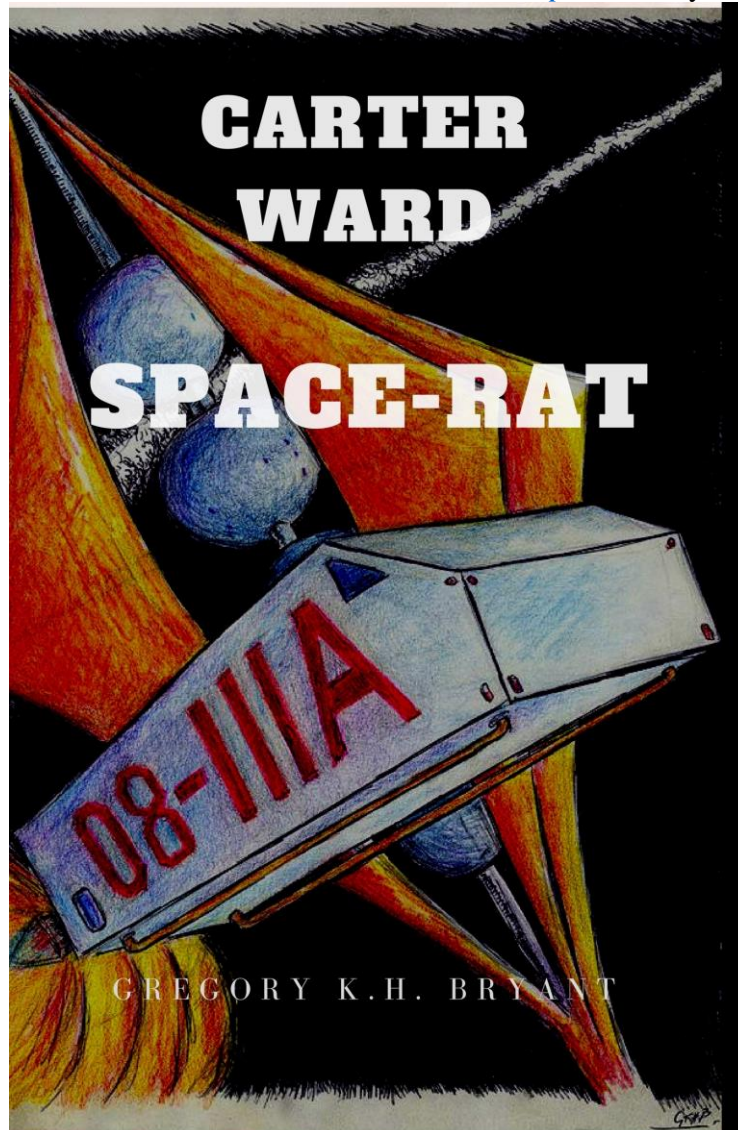
"All righty, kids," Mud said to Hardy and Illara. "Y'all wait here and I'll be back in a bit."

Mud grinned.

With a swift and surreptitious motion that no one noticed, Rat patted his worn and dirty jumpsuit for the hidden pocket.

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

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



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THE LOST WORLD by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Chapter XIII: "A Sight which I shall Never Forget"

Just as the sun was setting upon that melancholy night I saw the lonely figure of the Indian upon the vast plain beneath me, and I watched him, our one faint hope of salvation, until he disappeared in the rising mists of evening which lay, rose-tinted from the setting sun, between the far-off river and me.

It was quite dark when I at last turned back to our stricken camp, and my last vision as I went was the red gleam of Zambo's fire, the one point of light in the wide world below, as was his faithful presence in my own shadowed soul. And yet I felt happier than I had done since this crushing blow had fallen upon me, for it was good to think that the world should know what we had done, so that at the worst our names should not perish with our bodies, but should go down to posterity associated with the result of our labours.

It was an awesome thing to sleep in that ill-fated camp; and yet it was even more unnerving to do so in the jungle. One or the other it must be. Prudence, on the one hand, warned me that I should remain on guard, but exhausted Nature, on the other, declared that I should do nothing of the kind. I climbed up on to a limb of the great ginkgo tree, but there was no secure perch on its rounded surface, and I should certainly have fallen off and broken my neck the moment I began to doze. I got down, therefore, and pondered over what I should do. Finally, I closed the door of the zareba, lit three separate fires in a triangle, and having eaten a hearty supper dropped off into a profound sleep, from which I had a strange and most welcome awakening. In the early morning, just as day was breaking, a hand was laid upon my arm, and starting up, with all my nerves in a tingle and my hand feeling for a rifle, I gave a cry of joy as in the cold grey light I saw Lord John Roxton kneeling beside me.

It was he—and yet it was not he. I had left him calm in his bearing, correct in his person, prim in his dress. Now he was pale and wild-eyed, gasping as he breathed like one who has run far and fast. His gaunt face was scratched and bloody, his clothes were hanging in rags, and his hat was gone. I stared in amazement, but he gave me no chance for questions. He was grabbing at our stores all the time he spoke.

"Quick, young fellah! Quick!" he cried. "Every moment counts. Get the rifles, both of them. I have the other two. Now, all the cartridges you can gather. Fill up your pockets. Now, some food. Half a dozen tins will do. That's all right! Don't wait to talk or think. Get a move on, or we are done!"

Still half-awake, and unable to imagine what it all might mean, I found myself hurrying madly after him through the wood, a rifle under each arm and a pile of various stores in my hands. He dodged in and out through the thickest of the scrub until he came to a dense clump of brushwood. Into this he rushed, regardless of thorns, and threw himself into the heart of it, pulling me down by his side.

"There!" he panted. "I think we are safe here. They'll make for the camp as sure as fate. It will

be their first idea. But this should puzzle 'em."

"What is it all?" I asked, when I had got my breath. "Where are the professors? And who is it that is after us?"

"The ape-men," he cried. "My God, what brutes! Don't raise your voice, for they have long ears—sharp eyes, too, but no power of scent, so far as I could judge, so I don't think they can sniff us out. Where have you been, young fellah? You were well out of it."

In a few sentences I whispered what I had done.

"Pretty bad," said he, when he had heard of the dinosaur and the pit. "It isn't quite the place for a rest cure. What? But I had no idea what its possibilities were until those devils got hold of us. The man-eatin' Papuans had me once, but they are Chesterfields compared to this crowd."

"How did it happen?" I asked.

"It was in the early mornin'. Our learned friends were just stirrin'. Hadn't even begun to argue yet. Suddenly it rained apes. They came down as thick as apples out of a tree. They had been assemblin' in the dark, I suppose, until that great tree over our heads was heavy with them. I shot one of them through the belly, but before we knew where we were they had us spread-eagled on our backs. I call them apes, but they carried sticks and stones in their hands and jabbered talk to each other, and ended up by tyin' our hands with creepers, so they are ahead of any beast that I have seen in my wanderin's. Ape-men—that's what they are—Missin' Links, and I wish they had stayed missin'. They carried off their wounded comrade—he was bleedin' like a pig—and then they sat around us, and if ever I saw frozen murder it was in their faces. They were big fellows, as big as a man and a deal stronger. Curious glassy grey eyes they have, under red tufts, and they just sat and gloated and gloated. Challenger is no chicken, but even he was cowed. He managed to struggle to his feet, and yelled out at them to have done with it and get it over. I think he had gone a bit off his head at the suddenness of it, for he raged and cursed at them like a lunatic. If they had been a row of his favourite Pressmen he could not have slanged them worse."

"Well, what did they do?" I was enthralled by the strange story which my companion was whispering into my ear, while all the time his keen eyes were shooting in every direction and his hand grasping his cocked rifle.

"I thought it was the end of us, but instead of that it started them on a new line. They all jabbered and chattered together. Then one of them stood out beside Challenger. You'll smile, young fellah, but 'pon my word they might have been kinsmen. I couldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. This old ape-man—he was their chief—was a sort of red Challenger, with every one of our friend's beauty points, only just a trifle more so. He had the short body, the big shoulders, the round chest, no neck, a great ruddy frill of a beard, the tufted eyebrows, the 'What do you want, damn you!' look about the eyes, and the whole catalogue. When the ape-man stood by Challenger and put his paw on his shoulder, the thing was complete. Summerlee was a bit hysterical, and he laughed till he cried. The ape-men laughed too—or at least they put up the devil of a cacklin'—and they set to work to drag us off through the forest. They wouldn't

touch the guns and things—thought them dangerous, I expect—but they carried away all our loose food. Summerlee and I got some rough handlin’ on the way—there’s my skin and my clothes to prove it—for they took us a bee-line through the brambles, and their own hides are like leather. But Challenger was all right. Four of them carried him shoulder high, and he went like a Roman emperor. What’s that?”

It was a strange clicking noise in the distance not unlike castanets.

“There they go!” said my companion, slipping cartridges into the second double barrelled “Express.” “Load them all up, young fellah my lad, for we’re not going to be taken alive, and don’t you think it! That’s the row they make when they are excited. By George! they’ll have something to excite them if they put us up. The ‘Last Stand of the Greys’ won’t be in it. ‘With their rifles grasped in their stiffened hands, mid a ring of the dead and dyin’,’ as some fathead sings. Can you hear them now?”

“Very far away.”

“That little lot will do no good, but I expect their search parties are all over the wood. Well, I was telling you my tale of woe. They got us soon to this town of theirs—about a thousand huts of branches and leaves in a great grove of trees near the edge of the cliff. It’s three or four miles from here. The filthy beasts fingered me all over, and I feel as if I should never be clean again. They tied us up—the fellow who handled me could tie like a bosun—and there we lay with our toes up, beneath a tree, while a great brute stood guard over us with a club in his hand. When I say ‘we’ I mean Summerlee and myself. Old Challenger was up a tree, eatin’ pines and havin’ the time of his life. I’m bound to say that he managed to get some fruit to us, and with his own hands he loosened our bonds. If you’d seen him sitting up in that tree hob-nobbin’ with his twin brother—and singin’ in that rollin’ bass of his, ‘Ring out, wild bells,’ cause music of any kind seemed to put ‘em in a good humour, you’d have smiled; but we weren’t in much mood for laughin’, as you can guess. They were inclined, within limits, to let him do what he liked, but they drew the line pretty sharply at us. It was a mighty consolation to us all to know that you were runnin’ loose and had the archives in your keepin’.

“Well, now, young fellah, I’ll tell you what will surprise you. You say you saw signs of men, and fires, traps, and the like. Well, we have seen the natives themselves. Poor devils they were, down-faced little chaps, and had enough to make them so. It seems that the humans hold one side of this plateau—over yonder, where you saw the caves—and the ape-men hold this side, and there is bloody war between them all the time. That’s the situation, so far as I could follow it. Well, yesterday the ape-men got hold of a dozen of the humans and brought them in as prisoners. You never heard such a jabberin’ and shriekin’ in your life. The men were little red fellows, and had been bitten and clawed so that they could hardly walk. The ape-men put two of them to death there and then—fairly pulled the arm off one of them—it was perfectly beastly. Plucky little chaps they are, and hardly gave a squeak. But it turned us absolutely sick. Summerlee fainted, and even Challenger had as much as he could stand. I think they have cleared, don’t you?”

We listened intently, but nothing save the calling of the birds broke the deep peace of the forest.

Lord Roxton went on with his story.

“I think you have had the escape of your life, young fellah my lad. It was catchin’ those Indians that put you clean out of their heads, else they would have been back to the camp for you as sure as fate and gathered you in. Of course, as you said, they have been watchin’ us from the beginnin’ out of that tree, and they knew perfectly well that we were one short. However, they could think only of this new haul; so it was I, and not a bunch of apes, that dropped in on you in the morning. Well, we had a horrid business afterwards. My God! what a nightmare the whole thing is! You remember the great bristle of sharp canes down below where we found the skeleton of the American? Well, that is just under ape-town, and that’s the jumpin’-off place of their prisoners. I expect there’s heaps of skeletons there, if we looked for ‘em. They have a sort of clear parade-ground on the top, and they make a proper ceremony about it. One by one the poor devils have to jump, and the game is to see whether they are merely dashed to pieces or whether they get skewered on the canes. They took us out to see it, and the whole tribe lined up on the edge. Four of the Indians jumped, and the canes went through ‘em like knittin’ needles through a pat of butter. No wonder we found that poor Yankee’s skeleton with the canes growin’ between his ribs. It was horrible—but it was doocedly interestin’ too. We were all fascinated to see them take the dive, even when we thought it would be our turn next on the spring-board.

“Well, it wasn’t. They kept six of the Indians up for to-day—that’s how I understood it—but I fancy we were to be the star performers in the show. Challenger might get off, but Summerlee and I were in the bill. Their language is more than half signs, and it was not hard to follow them. So I thought it was time we made a break for it. I had been plottin’ it out a bit, and had one or two things clear in my mind. It was all on me, for Summerlee was useless and Challenger not much better. The only time they got together they got slangin’ because they couldn’t agree upon the scientific classification of these red-headed devils that had got hold of us. One said it was the *dryopithecus* of Java, the other said it was *pithecanthropus*. Madness, I call it—Loonies, both. But, as I say, I had thought out one or two points that were helpful. One was that these brutes could not run as fast as a man in the open. They have short, bandy legs, you see, and heavy bodies. Even Challenger could give a few yards in a hundred to the best of them, and you or I would be a perfect Shrubb. Another point was that they knew nothin’ about guns. I don’t believe they ever understood how the fellow I shot came by his hurt. If we could get at our guns there was no sayin’ what we could do.

“So I broke away early this mornin’, gave my guard a kick in the tummy that laid him out, and sprinted for the camp. There I got you and the guns, and here we are.”

“But the professors!” I cried, in consternation.

“Well, we must just go back and fetch ‘em. I couldn’t bring ‘em with me. Challenger was up the tree, and Summerlee was not fit for the effort. The only chance was to get the guns and try a rescue. Of course they may scupper them at once in revenge. I don’t think they would touch Challenger, but I wouldn’t answer for Summerlee. But they would have had him in any case. Of that I am certain. So I haven’t made matters any worse by boltin’. But we are honour bound to go back and have them out or see it through with them. So you can make up your soul, young fellah my lad, for it will be one way or the other before evenin’.”

I have tried to imitate here Lord Roxton's jerky talk, his short, strong sentences, the half-humorous, half-reckless tone that ran through it all. But he was a born leader. As danger thickened his jaunty manner would increase, his speech become more racy, his cold eyes glitter into ardent life, and his Don Quixote moustache bristle with joyous excitement. His love of danger, his intense appreciation of the drama of an adventure—all the more intense for being held tightly in—his consistent view that every peril in life is a form of sport, a fierce game betwixt you and Fate, with Death as a forfeit, made him a wonderful companion at such hours. If it were not for our fears as to the fate of our companions, it would have been a positive joy to throw myself with such a man into such an affair. We were rising from our brushwood hiding-place when suddenly I felt his grip upon my arm.

“By George!” he whispered, “here they come!”

From where we lay we could look down a brown aisle, arched with green, formed by the trunks and branches. Along this a party of the ape-men were passing. They went in single file, with bent legs and rounded backs, their hands occasionally touching the ground, their heads turning to left and right as they trotted along. Their crouching gait took away from their height, but I should put them at five feet or so, with long arms and enormous chests. Many of them carried sticks, and at the distance they looked like a line of very hairy and deformed human beings. For a moment I caught this clear glimpse of them. Then they were lost among the bushes.

“Not this time,” said Lord John, who had caught up his rifle. “Our best chance is to lie quiet until they have given up the search. Then we shall see whether we can't get back to their town and hit 'em where it hurts most. Give 'em an hour and we'll march.”

We filled in the time by opening one of our food tins and making sure of our breakfast. Lord Roxton had had nothing but some fruit since the morning before and ate like a starving man. Then, at last, our pockets bulging with cartridges and a rifle in each hand, we started off upon our mission of rescue. Before leaving it we carefully marked our little hiding-place among the brush-wood and its bearing to Fort Challenger, that we might find it again if we needed it. We slunk through the bushes in silence until we came to the very edge of the cliff, close to the old camp. There we halted, and Lord John gave me some idea of his plans.

“So long as we are among the thick trees these swine are our masters,” said he. “They can see us and we cannot see them. But in the open it is different. There we can move faster than they. So we must stick to the open all we can. The edge of the plateau has fewer large trees than further inland. So that's our line of advance. Go slowly, keep your eyes open and your rifle ready. Above all, never let them get you prisoner while there is a cartridge left—that's my last word to you, young fellah.”

When we reached the edge of the cliff I looked over and saw our good old black Zambo sitting smoking on a rock below us. I would have given a great deal to have hailed him and told him how we were placed, but it was too dangerous, lest we should be heard. The woods seemed to be full of the ape-men; again and again we heard their curious clicking chatter. At such times we plunged into the nearest clump of bushes and lay still until the sound had passed away. Our

advance, therefore, was very slow, and two hours at least must have passed before I saw by Lord John's cautious movements that we must be close to our destination. He motioned to me to lie still, and he crawled forward himself. In a minute he was back again, his face quivering with eagerness.

"Come!" said he. "Come quick! I hope to the Lord we are not too late already!"

I found myself shaking with nervous excitement as I scrambled forward and lay down beside him, looking out through the bushes at a clearing which stretched before us.

It was a sight which I shall never forget until my dying day—so weird, so impossible, that I do not know how I am to make you realize it, or how in a few years I shall bring myself to believe in it if I live to sit once more on a lounge in the Savage Club and look out on the drab solidity of the Embankment. I know that it will seem then to be some wild nightmare, some delirium of fever. Yet I will set it down now, while it is still fresh in my memory, and one at least, the man who lay in the damp grasses by my side, will know if I have lied.

A wide, open space lay before us—some hundreds of yards across—all green turf and low bracken growing to the very edge of the cliff. Round this clearing there was a semi-circle of trees with curious huts built of foliage piled one above the other among the branches. A rookery, with every nest a little house, would best convey the idea. The openings of these huts and the branches of the trees were thronged with a dense mob of ape-people, whom from their size I took to be the females and infants of the tribe. They formed the background of the picture, and were all looking out with eager interest at the same scene which fascinated and bewildered us.

In the open, and near the edge of the cliff, there had assembled a crowd of some hundred of these shaggy, red-haired creatures, many of them of immense size, and all of them horrible to look upon. There was a certain discipline among them, for none of them attempted to break the line which had been formed. In front there stood a small group of Indians—little, clean-limbed, red fellows, whose skins glowed like polished bronze in the strong sunlight. A tall, thin white man was standing beside them, his head bowed, his arms folded, his whole attitude expressive of his horror and dejection. There was no mistaking the angular form of Professor Summerlee.

In front of and around this dejected group of prisoners were several ape-men, who watched them closely and made all escape impossible. Then, right out from all the others and close to the edge of the cliff, were two figures, so strange, and under other circumstances so ludicrous, that they absorbed my attention. The one was our comrade, Professor Challenger. The remains of his coat still hung in strips from his shoulders, but his shirt had been all torn out, and his great beard merged itself in the black tangle which covered his mighty chest. He had lost his hat, and his hair, which had grown long in our wanderings, was flying in wild disorder. A single day seemed to have changed him from the highest product of modern civilization to the most desperate savage in South America. Beside him stood his master, the king of the ape-men. In all things he was, as Lord John had said, the very image of our Professor, save that his colouring was red instead of black. The same short, broad figure, the same heavy shoulders, the same forward hang of the arms, the same bristling beard merging itself in the hairy chest. Only above the eyebrows, where the sloping forehead and low, curved skull of the ape-man were in sharp contrast to the

broad brow and magnificent cranium of the European, could one see any marked difference. At every other point the king was an absurd parody of the Professor.

All this, which takes me so long to describe, impressed itself upon me in a few seconds. Then we had very different things to think of, for an active drama was in progress. Two of the ape-men had seized one of the Indians out of the group and dragged him forward to the edge of the cliff. The king raised his hand as a signal. They caught the man by his leg and arm, and swung him three times backwards and forwards with tremendous violence. Then, with a frightful heave they shot the poor wretch over the precipice. With such force did they throw him that he curved high in the air before beginning to drop. As he vanished from sight, the whole assembly, except the guards, rushed forward to the edge of the precipice, and there was a long pause of absolute silence, broken by a mad yell of delight. They sprang about, tossing their long, hairy arms in the air and howling with exultation. Then they fell back from the edge, formed themselves again into line, and waited for the next victim.

This time it was Summerlee. Two of his guards caught him by the wrists and pulled him brutally to the front. His thin figure and long limbs struggled and fluttered like a chicken being dragged from a coop. Challenger had turned to the king and waved his hands frantically before him. He was begging, pleading, imploring for his comrade's life. The ape-man pushed him roughly aside and shook his head. It was the last conscious movement he was to make upon earth. Lord John's rifle cracked, and the king sank down, a tangled red sprawling thing, upon the ground.

"Shoot into the thick of them! Shoot! sonny, shoot!" cried my companion.

There are strange red depths in the soul of the most commonplace man. I am tender-hearted by nature, and have found my eyes moist many a time over the scream of a wounded hare. Yet the blood lust was on me now. I found myself on my feet emptying one magazine, then the other, clicking open the breech to re-load, snapping it to again, while cheering and yelling with pure ferocity and joy of slaughter as I did so. With our four guns the two of us made a horrible havoc. Both the guards who held Summerlee were down, and he was staggering about like a drunken man in his amazement, unable to realize that he was a free man. The dense mob of ape-men ran about in bewilderment, marvelling whence this storm of death was coming or what it might mean. They waved, gesticulated, screamed, and tripped up over those who had fallen. Then, with a sudden impulse, they all rushed in a howling crowd to the trees for shelter, leaving the ground behind them spotted with their stricken comrades. The prisoners were left for the moment standing alone in the middle of the clearing.

Challenger's quick brain had grasped the situation. He seized the bewildered Summerlee by the arm, and they both ran towards us. Two of their guards bounded after them and fell to two bullets from Lord John. We ran forward into the open to meet our friends, and pressed a loaded rifle into the hands of each. But Summerlee was at the end of his strength. He could hardly totter. Already the ape-men were recovering from their panic. They were coming through the brushwood and threatening to cut us off. Challenger and I ran Summerlee along, one at each of his elbows, while Lord John covered our retreat, firing again and again as savage heads snarled at us out of the bushes. For a mile or more the chattering brutes were at our very heels. Then the pursuit slackened, for they learned our power and would no longer face that unerring rifle. When we had

at last reached the camp, we looked back and found ourselves alone.

So it seemed to us; and yet we were mistaken. We had hardly closed the thornbush door of our zareba, clasped each other's hands, and thrown ourselves panting upon the ground beside our spring, when we heard a patter of feet and then a gentle, plaintive crying from outside our entrance. Lord Roxton rushed forward, rifle in hand, and threw it open. There, prostrate upon their faces, lay the little red figures of the four surviving Indians, trembling with fear of us and yet imploring our protection. With an expressive sweep of his hands one of them pointed to the woods around them, and indicated that they were full of danger. Then, darting forward, he threw his arms round Lord John's legs, and rested his face upon them.

"By George!" cried our peer, pulling at his moustache in great perplexity, "I say—what the deuce are we to do with these people? Get up, little chappie, and take your face off my boots."

Summerlee was sitting up and stuffing some tobacco into his old briar.

"We've got to see them safe," said he. "You've pulled us all out of the jaws of death. My word! it was a good bit of work!"

"Admirable!" cried Challenger. "Admirable! Not only we as individuals, but European science collectively, owe you a deep debt of gratitude for what you have done. I do not hesitate to say that the disappearance of Professor Summerlee and myself would have left an appreciable gap in modern zoological history. Our young friend here and you have done most excellently well."

He beamed at us with the old paternal smile, but European science would have been somewhat amazed could they have seen their chosen child, the hope of the future, with his tangled, unkempt head, his bare chest, and his tattered clothes. He had one of the meat-tins between his knees, and sat with a large piece of cold Australian mutton between his fingers. The Indian looked up at him, and then, with a little yelp, cringed to the ground and clung to Lord John's leg.

"Don't you be scared, my bonnie boy," said Lord John, patting the matted head in front of him. "He can't stick your appearance, Challenger; and, by George! I don't wonder. All right, little chap, he's only a human, just the same as the rest of us."

"Really, sir!" cried the Professor.

"Well, it's lucky for you, Challenger, that you ARE a little out of the ordinary. If you hadn't been so like the king——"

"Upon my word, Lord John, you allow yourself great latitude."

"Well, it's a fact."

"I beg, sir, that you will change the subject. Your remarks are irrelevant and unintelligible. The question before us is what are we to do with these Indians? The obvious thing is to escort them home, if we knew where their home was."

“There is no difficulty about that,” said I. “They live in the caves on the other side of the central lake.”

“Our young friend here knows where they live. I gather that it is some distance.”

“A good twenty miles,” said I.

Summerlee gave a groan.

“I, for one, could never get there. Surely I hear those brutes still howling upon our track.”

As he spoke, from the dark recesses of the woods we heard far away the jabbering cry of the ape-men. The Indians once more set up a feeble wail of fear.

“We must move, and move quick!” said Lord John. “You help Summerlee, young fellah. These Indians will carry stores. Now, then, come along before they can see us.”

In less than half-an-hour we had reached our brushwood retreat and concealed ourselves. All day we heard the excited calling of the ape-men in the direction of our old camp, but none of them came our way, and the tired fugitives, red and white, had a long, deep sleep. I was dozing myself in the evening when someone plucked my sleeve, and I found Challenger kneeling beside me.

“You keep a diary of these events, and you expect eventually to publish it, Mr. Malone,” said he, with solemnity.

“I am only here as a Press reporter,” I answered.

“Exactly. You may have heard some rather fatuous remarks of Lord John Roxton’s which seemed to imply that there was some—some resemblance——”

“Yes, I heard them.”

“I need not say that any publicity given to such an idea—any levity in your narrative of what occurred—would be exceedingly offensive to me.”

“I will keep well within the truth.”

“Lord John’s observations are frequently exceedingly fanciful, and he is capable of attributing the most absurd reasons to the respect which is always shown by the most undeveloped races to dignity and character. You follow my meaning?”

“Entirely.”

“I leave the matter to your discretion.” Then, after a long pause, he added: “The king of the ape-men was really a creature of great distinction—a most remarkably handsome and intelligent

personality. Did it not strike you?"

"A most remarkable creature," said I.

And the Professor, much eased in his mind, settled down to his slumber once more.

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THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

Chapter XVII: The Leprechaun

The shell carried us straight back to the house of Yolara. Larry was awaiting me. We stood again before the tenebrous wall where first we had faced the priestess and the Voice. And as we stood, again the portal appeared with all its disconcerting, magical abruptness.

But now the scene was changed. Around the jet table were grouped a number of figures—Lugur, Yolara beside him; seven others—all of them fair-haired and all men save one who sat at the left of the priestess—an old, old woman, how old I could not tell, her face bearing traces of beauty that must once have been as great as Yolara's own, but now ravaged, in some way awesome; through its ruins the fearful, malicious gaiety shining out like a spirit of joy held within a corpse!

Began then our examination, for such it was. And as it progressed I was more and more struck by the change in the O'Keefe. All flippancy was gone, rarely did his sense of humour reveal itself in any of his answers. He was like a cautious swordsman, fencing, guarding, studying his opponent; or rather, like a chess-player who keeps sensing some far-reaching purpose in the game: alert, contained, watchful. Always he stressed the power of our surface races, their multitudes, their solidarity.

Their questions were myriad. What were our occupations? Our system of government? How great were the waters? The land? Intensely interested were they in the World War, querying minutely into its causes, its effects. In our weapons their interest was avid. And they were exceedingly minute in their examination of us as to the ruins which had excited our curiosity; their position and surroundings—and if others than ourselves might be expected to find and pass through their entrance!

At this I shot a glance at Lugur. He did not seem unduly interested. I wondered if the Russian had told him as yet of the girl of the rosy wall of the Moon Pool Chamber and the real reasons for our search. Then I answered as briefly as possible—omitting all reference to these things. The red dwarf watched me with unmistakable amusement—and I knew Marakinoff had told him. But clearly Lugur had kept his information even from Yolara; and as clearly she had spoken to none of that episode when O'Keefe's automatic had shattered the Keth-smitten vase. Again I felt that sense of deep bewilderment—of helpless search for clue to all the tangle.

For two hours we were questioned and then the priestess called Rador and let us go.

Larry was sombre as we returned. He walked about the room uneasily.

"Hell's brewing here all right," he said at last, stopping before me. "I can't make out just the particular brand—that's all that bothers me. We're going to have a stiff fight, that's sure. What I want to do quick is to find the Golden Girl, Doc. Haven't seen her on the wall lately, have you?" he queried, hopefully fantastic.

"Laugh if you want to," he went on. "But she's our best bet. It's going to be a race between her

and the O'Keefe banshee—but I put my money on her. I had a queer experience while I was in that garden, after you'd left." His voice grew solemn. "Did you ever see a leprechaun, Doc?" I shook my head again, as solemnly. "He's a little man in green," said Larry. "Oh, about as high as your knee. I saw one once—in Carntogher Woods. And as I sat there, half asleep, in Yolará's garden, the living spit of him stepped out from one of those bushes, twirling a little shillalah.

"'It's a tight box ye're gettin' in, Larry avick,' said he, 'but don't ye be downhearted, lad.'

"'I'm carrying on,' said I, 'but you're a long way from Ireland,' I said, or thought I did.

"'Ye've a lot o' friends there,' he answered. 'An' where the heart rests the feet are swift to follow. Not that I'm sayin' I'd like to live here, Larry,' said he.

"'I know where my heart is now,' I told him. 'It rests on a girl with golden eyes and the hair and swan-white breast of Eilidh the Fair—but me feet don't seem to get me to her,' I said."

The brogue thickened.

"An' the little man in green nodded his head an' whirled his shillalah.

"'It's what I came to tell ye,' says he. 'Don't ye fall for the Bhean-Nimher, the serpent woman wit' the blue eyes; she's a daughter of Ivor, lad—an' don't ye do nothin' to make the brown-haired coleen ashamed o' ye, Larry O'Keefe. I knew yer great, great grandfather an' his before him, aroon,' says he, 'an' wan o' the O'Keefe failin's is to think their hearts big enough to hold all the wimmen o' the world. A heart's built to hold only wan permanently, Larry,' he says, 'an' I'm warnin' ye a nice girl don't like to move into a place all cluttered up wid another's washin' an' mendin' an' cookin' an' other things pertainin' to general wife work. Not that I think the blue-eyed wan is keen for mendin' an' cookin'!' says he.

"'You don't have to be comin' all this way to tell me that,' I answer.

"'Well, I'm just a tellin' you,' he says. 'Ye've got some rough knocks comin', Larry. In fact, ye're in for a devil of a time. But, remember that ye're the O'Keefe,' says he. 'An' while the bhoys are all wid ye, avick, ye've got to be on the job yourself.'

"'I hope,' I tell him, 'that the O'Keefe banshee can find her way here in time—that is, if it's necessary, which I hope it won't be.'

"'Don't ye worry about that,' says he. 'Not that she's keen on leavin' the ould sod, Larry. The good ould soul's in quite a state o' mind about ye, aroon. I don't mind tellin' ye, lad, that she's mobilizing all the clan an' if she has to come for ye, avick, they'll be wid her an' they'll sweep this joint clean before ye go. What they'll do to it'll make the Big Wind look like a summer breeze on Lough Lene! An' that's about all, Larry. We thought a voice from the Green Isle would cheer ye. Don't fergit that ye're the O'Keefe an' I say it again—all the bhoys are wid ye. But we want t' kape bein' proud o' ye, lad!'

“An’ I looked again and there was only a bush waving.”

There wasn’t a smile in my heart—or if there was it was a very tender one.

“I’m going to bed,” he said abruptly. “Keep an eye on the wall, Doc!”

Between the seven sleeps that followed, Larry and I saw but little of each other. Yolara sought him more and more. Thrice we were called before the Council; once we were at a great feast, whose splendours and surprises I can never forget. Largely I was in the company of Rador. Together we two passed the green barriers into the dwelling-place of the ladala.

They seemed provided with everything needful for life. But everywhere was an oppressiveness, a gathering together of hate, that was spiritual rather than material—as tangible as the latter and far, far more menacing!

“They do not like to dance with the Shining One,” was Rador’s constant and only reply to my efforts to find the cause.

Once I had concrete evidence of the mood. Glancing behind me, I saw a white, vengeful face peer from behind a tree-trunk, a hand lift, a shining dart speed from it straight toward Rador’s back. Instinctively I thrust him aside. He turned upon me angrily. I pointed to where the little missile lay, still quivering, on the ground. He gripped my hand.

“That, some day I will repay!” he said. I looked again at the thing. At its end was a tiny cone covered with a glistening, gelatinous substance.

Rador pulled from a tree beside us a fruit somewhat like an apple.

“Look!” he said. He dropped it upon the dart—and at once, before my eyes, in less than ten seconds, the fruit had rotted away!

“That’s what would have happened to Rador but for you, friend!” he said.

Come now between this and the prelude to the latter half of the drama whose history this narrative is—only scattering and necessarily fragmentary observations.

First—the nature of the ebon opacities, blocking out the spaces between the pavilion-pillars or covering their tops like roofs. These were magnetic fields, light absorbers, negating the vibrations of radiance; literally screens of electric force which formed as impervious a barrier to light as would have screens of steel.

They instantaneously made night appear in a place where no night was. But they interposed no obstacle to air or to sound. They were extremely simple in their inception—no more miraculous than is glass, which, inversely, admits the vibrations of light, but shuts out those coarser ones we call air—and, partly, those others which produce upon our auditory nerves the effects we call sound.

Briefly their mechanism was this:

[For the same reason that Dr. Goodwin's exposition of the mechanism of the atomic engines was deleted, his description of the light-destroying screens has been deleted by the Executive Council.—J. B. F., President, I. A. of S.]

There were two favoured classes of the ladala—the soldiers and the dream-makers. The dream-makers were the most astonishing social phenomena, I think, of all. Denied by their circumscribed environment the wider experiences of us of the outer world, the Murians had perfected an amazing system of escape through the imagination.

They were, too, intensely musical. Their favourite instruments were double flutes; immensely complex pipe-organs; harps, great and small. They had another remarkable instrument made up of a double octave of small drums which gave forth percussions remarkably disturbing to the emotional centres.

It was this love of music that gave rise to one of the few truly humorous incidents of our cavered life. Larry came to me—it was just after our fourth sleep, I remember.

“Come on to a concert,” he said.

We skimmed off to one of the bridge garrisons. Rador called the two-score guards to attention; and then, to my utter stupefaction, the whole company, O’Keefe leading them, roared out the anthem, “God Save the King.” They sang—in a closer approach to the English than might have been expected scores of miles below England’s level. “Send him victorious! Happy and glorious!” they bellowed.

He quivered with suppressed mirth at my paralysis of surprise.

“Taught ‘em that for Marakinoff’s benefit!” he gasped. “Wait till that Red hears it. He’ll blow up.

“Just wait until you hear Yolara lisp a pretty little thing I taught her,” said Larry as we set back for what we now called home. There was an impish twinkle in his eyes.

And I did hear. For it was not many minutes later that the priestess condescended to command me to come to her with O’Keefe.

“Show Goodwin how much you have learned of our speech, O lady of the lips of honeyed flame!” murmured Larry.

She hesitated; smiled at him, and then from that perfect mouth, out of the exquisite throat, in the voice that was like the chiming of little silver bells, she trilled a melody familiar to me indeed:

“She’s only a bird in a gilded cage,

A bee-yu-tiful sight to see—”

And so on to the bitter end.

“She thinks it’s a love-song,” said Larry when we had left. “It’s only part of a repertoire I’m teaching her. Honestly, Doc, it’s the only way I can keep my mind clear when I’m with her,” he went on earnestly. “She’s a devil-ess from hell—but a wonder. Whenever I find myself going I get her to sing that, or Take Back Your Gold! or some other ancient lay, and I’m back again—pronto—with the right perspective! POP goes all the mystery! ‘Hell!’ I say, ‘she’s only a woman!’”

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