

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 13, ISSUE 2
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THE SALTED EARTH

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LUBACZEWSKI
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GREAT
AMERICAN
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THE CESSATION OF CLAIRVOYANT FATALITIES

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**THE UNEDIFYING
SPECTACLE OF THE
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PROFESSOR EUGENE
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**THE CELLAR
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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 13, Issue 2
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Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels, and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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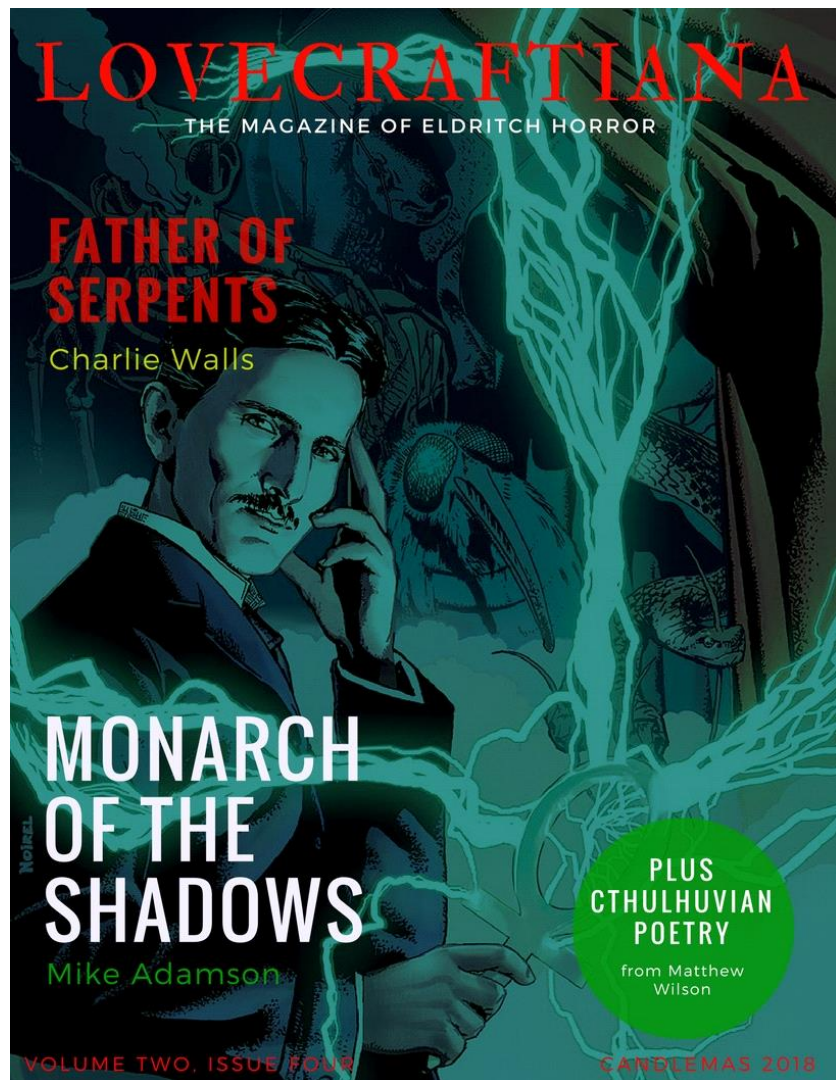
EDITORIAL

This week, we bring a close to the tale of Professor Agincourt's duplication. This is followed by occult shenanigans from literary ipissimus Stephen Hernandez, and a heart-warming tale of the heartland from proud American boy Paul Lubaczewski. And Steven Havelock takes us down into the cellar--and deeper!

Holmes, Watson, and Miss Kate Marency begin their African trek. Turhan Mot views the reconstructed Grand Marquis with mixed emotions. On Mars, Eveena finds the remedy to be worse than the sickness. And on Earth, the curate threatens to bear witness.

—Gavin Chappell

Available from Rogue Planet Press: the Candlemas 2018 edition of [*Lovecraftiana—the Magazine of Eldritch Horror*](#).



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THE UNEDIFYING SPECTACLE OF THE DUPLICATION OF PROFESSOR EUGENE AGINCOURT by MS Swift

Part Two

Late-nineteenth century medium Sir Parnassus Mang believes he can commune with spirits using music. When staying at the expansive, West Country estate of his friend and fellow researcher into the weird—Lord Brutus Pemberton—over the summer of 189-, Mang found himself embroiled in a series of bizarre events. Previously, the medium and his drunken friend were transporting the immoral duplicates of a distinguished scientist back to his retirement lair.

The Professors' ivy-choked walls and conical-roofed tower came into view atop a wooded vale. A waterfall that descended from the heights above was normally a substantial torrent, but its roar was now reduced to a haunting whisper after the prolonged dry spell.

"Mang, Pemberton, my dear fellows, good day and welcome to you sirs, welcome!" The voice of Eugene Agincourt echoed from above them as they disembarked. They looked up to see the sprightly pensioner waving from a window in his tower, "you will be delighted and amazed at my most recent success!"

"I wouldn't be so sure about that!" Pemberton called back, as the remaining three Professors descended from the coach.

"Oh, I see you are familiar with my latest work," the Professor observed and with a smile, he indicated that they should enter the keep.

They found to their surprise that the forecourt was cluttered with cats: great, fat, shapeless creatures that lay under the bright sunlight. As they stepped over them, each animal raised its head and hissed angrily, but out of either laziness or due to their sheer bulk, none raised a claw.

Leaving Prescott to look after the coach, the Professor's voice led them up a winding staircase that opened into a broad hallway. Here, a painting that had been duplicated many times was stacked on tables, chairs and rested against the walls. Mang peered at these replicas. Their paint was so faded and cracked that it was impossible to see what it originally depicted.

"Mang, Pemberton, welcome gentlemen," Agincourt said as he appeared through a door in the far wall. He smiled and clasped the hand of each man.

"What on earth have you been up to?" Pemberton demanded.

"Your doppelgangers have been causing mayhem!" Mang added.

"It is a wonderful discovery, my greatest work yet!" the academic joyfully exclaimed.

"But why let yourself run wild!" Mang implored.

Agincourt turned and addressed his doubles in a stern voice. "Now you three, I told you what your errands where! I'm very disappointed that you have neglected your duties!" The three Professors looked down at the floor, smothering giggles like impudent school boys.

"It is an enormous privilege to be a duplicate of myself, and I really hope you will not disappoint yourselves and myself! Now up into the tower with you!"

At that the three men scuttled through the door Agincourt had emerged from.

"Well, that was highly ineffective," Pemberton sniffed, "they need a severe thrashing, not a gentle talking to."

"They are respected Professors in their eighties," Agincourt said, before he ushered the two up the stair case into his tower, "now you must see my latest device!"

The laboratory was located in an upper chamber of the tower overlooking the courtyard. In keeping with the rest of the castle it was in a very poor state of repair. The room was dominated by the duplicating device itself; this consisted of great reels of cable connecting mirrors, vats, tanks, wheels, glass phials, a furnace and all culminated in a strange coffin-like item from which bundles of twigs protruded.

"It's got me thinking, all this inventing; perhaps I'll have to try a hand at it again!" Mang mused.

"Please spare us that at least, Mang!" Pemberton grunted in reply, horrendous visions of consequences making a rare appearance in his mind.

"Now this is what I call a mimeograph," Agincourt said, holding up a small picture. "It is an image of myself."

"You look remarkably shrivelled and gnome-like on this," Mang noted.

"Well observed, Mang," Pemberton added, "he looks positively hideous does he not! Indeed, you look remarkably superior to your doubles in real life!"

"Yes, well, that will be the healthy, zest-inducing properties of inventing machines that will transform the world," the Professor declared, "anyway, the process is extremely complex, but I shall attempt to adapt my explanation to suit your particular intellects! We take a large quantity of straw, woven into the figure of a man; we add to this a quantity of earth, a drop of my blood, a pinch of salt and a feather! This is the substance which will be transformed into the body. The next part of the process is to mimeograph the form that is replicated. Now we place this image into water, run an electric current through the water. We use this system of mirrors to reflect the image into the case and then send this current through to the re-activator case that contains the body. Electricity, will-power, genius, clever use of mirrors and the base matter of the earth are the fundamental components of this process. Undeterred by initial failures when duplicating dead bodies, I decided to press on with human specimens, i.e. me! Now then, I shall start the generator, we shall sit and eat, and then the process should be complete."

The Professor placed a large, scarecrow-like figure into the coffin, closed the lid and set the process in motion. It appeared that the generation of electricity involved producing a great deal of sparks and smoke. Both Mang and Pemberton, heavy smokers as they were, found it hard to breathe, but Agincourt appeared to be unaffected and spoke at length on all manner of high-minded topics. He indicated that they should sit around a table cluttered with scientific paraphernalia as his doubles brought up a simple meal of bread and cheeses. As the Professor spoke and they ate, Pemberton noted that the three other Professors lacked the decorum of proper servants and stood watching them intently.

“Don’t know why you duplicated yourself, Agincourt!” Pemberton roared, “I would not stand to see myself as a servant, not in the blood, you see... hang on then—you sent them off to the nunnery to capture yourself some decent fillies who won’t speak! Brilliant old boy!”

“No, no, no, good sir,” Agincourt hastily countered, “I didn’t send my selves off; I took my selves there.”

“Well, how do you know they won’t sneak off again?”

“I’ll have another good word with myself and I like to think those words will have an effect: no more nonsense from me!” the Professor declared.

Before Pemberton could respond, the cessation of the sparks and the release of thick clouds that formed into choking smog suggested that the duplication process was complete. Through the gloom, Mang could discern the figure of the Professor unbolting the coffin and the smoke briefly intensified before a window was opened.

“Good afternoon,” the Professor could be heard to say.

A series of groans arose followed by a creak and the sound of flesh slapping on stone. The smell of singed straw was thickened by the pungent reek of melting fat.

“Good afternoon, Professor,” a voice returned, rather like the Professor’s but shriller and hoarser, “or is it evening?”

Through the mist the figure appeared: a hunched, shrivelled apparition of the Professor, even more gnome-like than the other doubles, a leering, crouching representation of the noble inventor that inspired only distrust and discomfort in the two onlookers.

“Gads, it’s foul!” Pemberton announced.

“As your breath is, Pemberton,” the creature shrieked and then cackled.

“Now then, Professor, that’s neither funny nor polite. You must accept that the observers are less likely to be unprejudiced...” Agincourt reprimanded. His face now positively shone through the smoke—compassion and wisdom radiated from that countenance along with the ardour of

musings among the celestial realms. The original Professor's beauty was exaggerated by the hideousness of the wretch that staggered forth.

"And you saw fit to release one of these doubles onto the surrounding villages?" Mang asked as he eyed the repugnant being.

The Professor smiled with the indulgent air of the proud parent. "I like to call them dopple-mimics, and I did need to stock up on ale and bread! I also like to think that I can learn to exist in society and carry on my good work!"

"Why not duplicate your existing ale and bread?" Pemberton asked.

"I tried that," Agincourt replied, "it came out rotten."

"Did it not occur to you that if the food and ale went rotten then perhaps your dopple-mimics would too?" Mang asked.

"No, can't say that that idea struck me," Agincourt said in a surprised tone of voice, and he fell into a brief period of reflection. His fledgling journey of discovery was interrupted by a series of wails and shrieks from the courtyard below.

"What is that ungodly racket?" Pemberton demanded. The tower's window afforded a view into the courtyard below and they saw that the other two Professors were back. They were in a state of apparent intoxication and they bore with them some large burden with which they swayed and staggered. The new Professor joined them at the window, a smile playing across his thin lips.

"Professors!" he called out to the returnees, his voice rasping.

"Eh, Professor, thank you, that's enough!" the progenitor of this bizarre brood chastised him.

His other drew back, his eyes narrowing in an evil glare.

"Shifty one, that!" Pemberton declared, "I possess a good eye for his sort, pick 'em out no problem! I'd have a servant flogged if he spoke to me like that!"

"We are not servants!" the new Professor rasped, his frame trembling with ape-like fury.

"We! We! You are me, but whilst I speak for me, you speak for all of us!" Agincourt said, appearing to grasp the meaning of his own words.

"No, he does not, Professor!" In the shaded corners of the chamber, the three other Professors had gathered, one holding a spear and another an axe.

"What do you mean by this?" Agincourt inquired, his face a picture of quiet authority.

"Back off, you dogs!" Pemberton demanded, his face a storm of apoplexy as four Professors

advanced, their own visages revealing both discontent and foul machinations. From the stairs heated whisperings and suppressed giggles emanated and then two Professors burst into the room bearing, bound and gagged, Abbess Wheeler!

“Abbess,” Pemberton called, “Abbess Wheeler!”

“Mmmm,” the good lady returned, struggling against the ropes and gag which held her.

“Kidnapping is a crime,” Agincourt said, horrified.

“She’s ours now,” the latest addition to the brood leered, rubbing his hands together, “we’ll make use of her when number seven is among us!”

“Well, it appears that some unpleasantness is due to unfold,” Mang sagely noted.

“Now is time for you to back away so that a gentlemanly discussion can ensue!” Agincourt advised.

Pemberton raised his cane and lashed it into the most recent Professor’s face. It struck with a moist retort, slicing off a chunk of skin that curled and collapsed onto the floor.

“His face, it’s melting,” the good lord exclaimed.

The leering, gobliness features were starting to congeal, sag and collapse into each other yet still the four advanced.

“These knees are not the knees of suppliants, designed to bend and bow and sue for grace,” the new Professor hissed with an evil intensity, “our ambition is to rule, to unfetter our riotous urges, to multiply and to indulge in all the excesses that the long years we spent in solitary study have denied us!”

The four drew closer, their gait even more hunched and simian than before, their skin peeling and flaking away, their features distorting.

“Stop there,” Agincourt said, “I have no need to defend my record, save shall I merely remind you of the fine minds I have helped to shape!”

He indicated Mang at this point, but his doppel-mimics merely pushed passed him.

“You were created to extend my work, to serve the world, not yourselves!” Agincourt persisted.

“We serve our self, though we must draw on the power of Hades itself!” the new Professor snapped.

The two armed Professors jabbed their weapons at Mang and Pemberton, pushing them toward a cupboard. Once the two men were within its gloomy depths, the door was slammed shut and

locked. Outside, the Professors could be heard arguing about whether to kill the two of them, or to make haste and duplicate the seventh dopple-mimic.

“We shall create another of ourselves, the seventh,” the rasping voice announced, “the process is near completion.”

“What do you mean, the process?” Agincourt’s golden voice inquired.

“Have you not yet deduced, Professor?”

“No, well, you...I mean...we are up to no good?” Agincourt said in his soft tones.

“Fascinating!” Mang murmured, “The seventh of these doubles appears to have some significance for them. It also appears that some form of soliloquising is occurring...”

He was interrupted by the vast noise and smoke that filtered under the door as the duplication process got underway again. The Professors could be heard banging about, shrieking and hollering, whilst all the while Agincourt tried and failed to exert control over proceedings.

“I suppose the only course of action left is to communicate with the ether, the world of spirits!” Mang produced his flute and began to play.

“What good is that going to do?” Pemberton asked in a weary tone.

Mang shrugged and began to play. The notes resonated in the cupboard and the medium felt them engage with the waves of sound produced from the laboratory, distorting and splitting the vibrations. Mang’s sixth sense tingled; his mind became a pool crossed with many ripples reflecting both dark and light. As he played, the light grew stronger, as if the pool’s surface was calmed and an image started to form. The process he termed psycho-audiencisation allowed him to sense what was occurring in the ether, the world of spirits beyond the manifest world. As he played, he saw Agincourt seated in the lotus position above a pool of filthy, scum-ridden water that slopped and seethed with latent power.

“Now let us see our most profound revelation,” a voice squawked from beyond the door, “the darkest aspect of ourselves.” The sound of the box door being wrenched open reached the two men and they heard all the Professors squawk then gasp in horror. A horrendous noise erupted from within the room, it was a voice of sorts that wailed and shuddered accompanied by the noise of erupting boils, popping and squelching under great folds of matter that squashed into each other.

The wall shook at the noise, the door frame shuddered, and then suddenly the door was unlocked. Abbess Wheeler ripped the door back to find Pemberton tensed with his cane raised and Mang prancing on a rug, playing his pipe.

“There’s no time for that,” she shouted, “now I’ve slipped my bonds, we have to stop this nonsense!”

Mang and Pemberton hurried out passed the Abbess, but the sight that greeted them stopped them short. The lid of the coffin had been thrust open. Sparks and smoke billowed out around a humanoid form that towered over the machine; its flesh had broken into strands of writhing tentacles that flopped and groped at the air around them. The other six duplicated Professors were collapsing into a single, undulating mass which flowed towards the new figure, which absorbed the extra matter into itself with an awful sucking sound. The monstrous apparition also unspooled from itself strings of flesh that were flung out to cover the room in a hideous, fleshy web. Yet alien as was this sight, the vision across the room also amazed the onlookers for hovering in opposition to the creature was Agincourt. The Professor floated, contorting into Yogic positions as he did so, his body aglow and his countenance bearing a beatific expression of compassionate endurance.

As the being threw out further whips of flesh, the hovering Professor exuded emanations of light that deflected the flesh causing it to curl back and tangle. With a sudden throb of energy, the true Professor began to fade: he first straightened himself up, his face bearing a look of unyielding acceptance and then he rose higher; as he did so, the mass of molten flesh seemed to contract and then suddenly he was gone and the gelatinous matter contracted and vanished as if sucked out of the world by the pulling of an invisible plug.

“What an unedifying experience! Honestly, men!” Abbess Wheeler exclaimed, once they made their way back to the nunnery, “when they are not thinking about reproducing in one way, they find an even messier and nastier method!”

She then proceeded to lecture the men on the dangers of seeking to challenge God’s natural order.

The following day the two men sat in the garden of Pemberton’s home at Babblesbury-on-the-Wold sipping a cider each, the last of the previous year’s vintage.

“Well, he’s gone!” Mang said as he gazed out at the downs, where the white giant gesticulated toward the west. The slime that the professors had collapsed into had all evaporated and of the real Professor, there was no sign. Pemberton had ordered his men to pack the equipment up, ready to be sent to the London headquarters of their Noble Order.

“It appeared each doubling reduced the evil in the original Agincourt, concentrating it into his creation until eventually they became so vile they collapsed into the swamp of their own moral degeneracy and he, in contrast, became too pure for this world; they became uglier and he grew in...beauty. Truth is beauty and all that. Anyway, he sucked the energy in what was left of them, burnt it up, to transcend to some higher realm. Gone, but not, I think, lost to darkness and distance...”

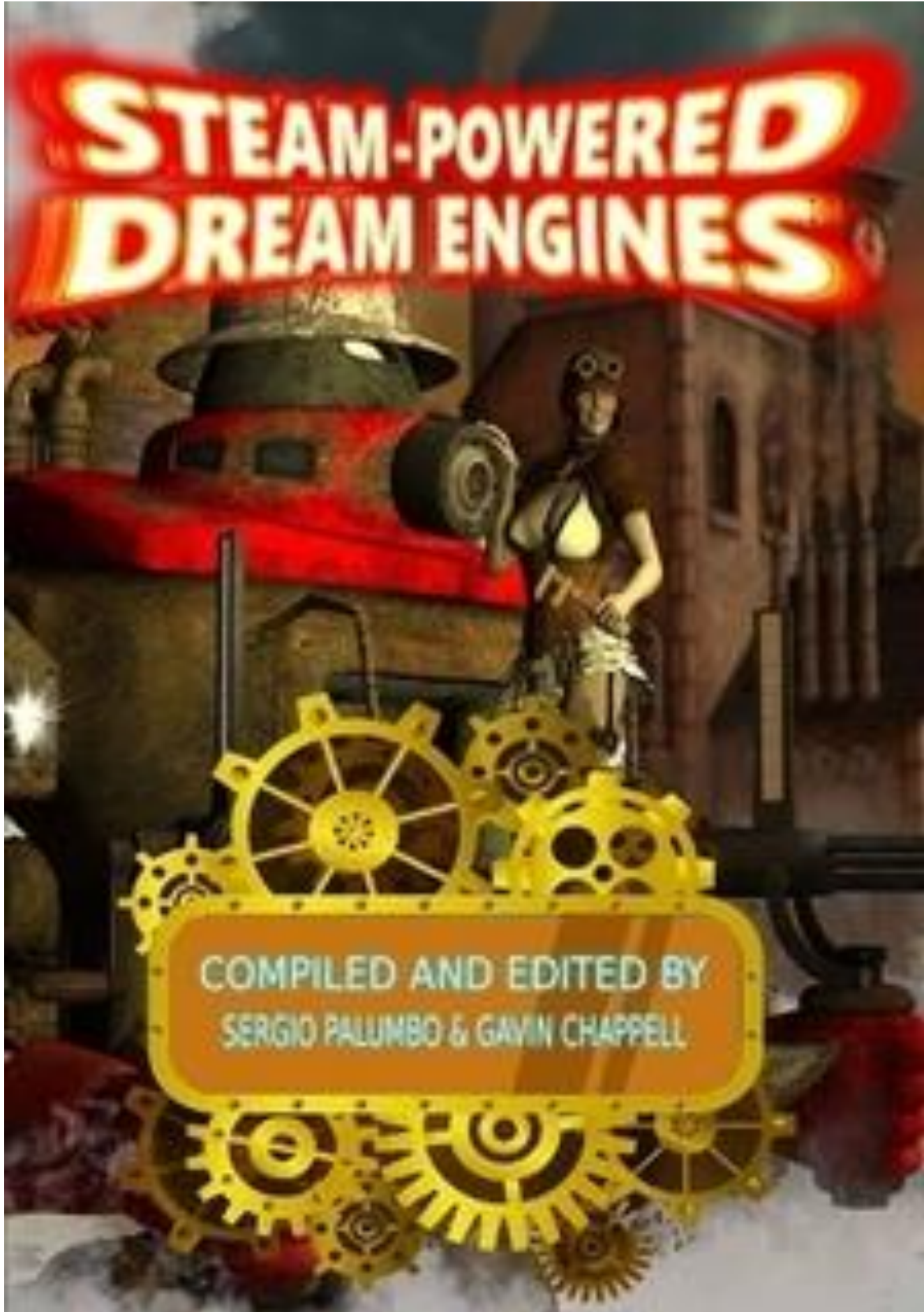
And with that vague but comforting thought, the two men toasted the Professor and took a hearty swig of cider.

THE END

For any who can bring themselves to, the further adventures of Mang and Pemberton are to be found in '[Steam-powered Dream Engines](#)'

[Available from Rogue Planet Press](#)

STEAM-POWERED DREAM ENGINES

A detailed steampunk illustration. In the center, a woman with a determined expression wears a dark, form-fitting outfit with a white corset and a leather skirt. She has goggles on her forehead and a small mechanical device on her chest. She stands next to a large, complex mechanical engine with a prominent red horizontal band. The background shows a dark, industrial cityscape with tall buildings and smoke in the air. The overall color palette is dominated by browns, greys, and the bright red of the engine's band.

COMPILED AND EDITED BY
SERGIO PALUMBO & GAVIN CHAPPELL

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THE CESSATION OF CLAIRVOYANT FATALITIES by Stephen Hernandez

It had been almost a month since the last attack. I felt almost, but not quite relieved. There was always the nagging suspicion that this was only a temporary reprieve. I even resorted to experimenting with casual sex because I could usually tune into the spirit world during an act of frantic, spontaneous sexual intercourse. It was then that I would feel the exquisite pain of connection. I picked up a young sailor down the docks. Anal intercourse could oft be relied upon to set off the voices, but none came to interrupt his grunting and groaning. I even let him finish inside me, an act I rarely risked—I was so desperate to make a connection, any connection.

Why had it failed? It had always worked so well for Aleister Crowley, whose teachings in Majick and the Dark Arts I so assiduously followed. Especially important to me was his doctrine of ‘Do What Thou Wilt’—I liked to do what I felt like. Perhaps the spirit that was tormenting my colleagues and I needed female guidance on the Earthly Plane. I tried a housewife that I occasionally used for such purposes. Although she was not a spiritualist herself she understood the fundamentals of the ritual, and I think she got a kick out of it. She was a woman who reached orgasm quickly. I could usually time it so that we climaxed together—another sure way to let the flood of connection surge into my mind. The more intense the orgasm, the better the reception. There was nothing. Nothing! Nothing... but the awful static of empty space.

I was not ashamed of my use of human bodies for my purposes. After all, it was much nobler than using them to satiate pure lust. Not so many centuries ago they would probably have accused me of witchcraft, of persuading them to participate in satanic worship, then burnt me at the stake. After I had finished my ritual, I found everything about these flesh vessels disgusting and cheap. Their very smell made me sick, and when they opened their mouth to voice one of their inane opinions, it was all I could do to stop myself vomiting all over them. In fact, it was the thought of them covered in my shit and vomit, and perhaps some of their blood, that kept me sane enough to make my excuses and quickly leave. I, of course, never invited any of the disgusting creatures back to my place. The thought of their foul bodies polluting the rarefied atmosphere of my home was too much to bear.

The others were experiencing this same sense of being in limbo. None of us could enter the spiritual plane anymore. We were trapped, it seemed, temporarily on the Earthly one. Carla had sent out a last head-message to all of us that we should physically meet up—there was to be no more head-messaging. We had to find a place unlikely to attract too much attention. Not that it was a likely contingent given that our outward appearance was a deliberately drab one. No-one ever paid us much attention. We all made sure of that. We instinctively hid our powers, careful not to draw any unwelcome scrutiny. All of us, that is those of us who remained, kept to a fairly mundane existence, average jobs accompanied by average incomes, and average pastimes. Some even had docile, average partners. Most of their partners knew little, if nothing, about their powers. Hence the docility—an inquisitive mind would be dangerous. I much preferred the bachelor life... it was far less hassle.

We had not expected to meet together so soon. It might be too dangerous, given our present situation. Whatever or whoever, was targeting us, would naturally expect us to continue with head-messaging rather than physically meeting up. They might even be tapping in. So, in her

own Machiavellian way, Carla was right: no more head-messaging was the only option. It could have fatal consequences. We met at an outdoors cafe opposite Trafalgar Square. The day was bright, a duck-egg blue sky with white fluffy clouds. I half-expected the much too perfect cotton candy clouds to part, and the opening credits of 'The Simpsons' appear. We were out in the open, surrounded by tourists who did not give us a second look, therefore: safe, as far as possible. There were seven of us. The remaining seven. The 'Magnificent Seven', I liked to think.

Carla, a Mexican by birth, opened the conversation. If you could call it that. It was more like a well-rehearsed speech. She coughed slightly before speaking, or speaking...

'As you are all well aware, someone, living or dead, seems to be intent on killing us. We were nine, now we are seven, and both of our former colleagues died whilst in contact with the spirit world. Seizures are common amongst us, but not these kind of seizures, not fatal seizures. So... it is my suggestion from this moment on we will desist from trying to make any sort of connection, including from this day, any kind of head-messaging... remain strictly on the mortal plane. As regards Earthly communication: no telephone calling, or text messaging, and definitely NO letters!'

It could have been my imagination, but I'm pretty sure she directed a look straight at me when she mentioned 'trying to make a connection'. No-one disagreed with her, or her recommendations. It was a logical argument. It was unanimously decided—by Carla—that we would meet once a month at different locations. Carla had even gone so far as to print out a list with dates and locations, but then she was always the most efficient amongst us. In another life she would have made some kind of super-efficient personal secretary. After her pontification we indulged in some idle chat. Then each of us went our own separate ways.

I felt like shouting out, 'This isn't fucking right... we should fight back!' But I didn't, obviously. She was the senior amongst us, and I had no appetite for a battle of wills, which, in all probability, I would lose. However, I had no intention of giving up my pursuit of the enemy. I, for one, didn't believe that our antagonist would give up so easily. It was after us with a deadly vengeance. I could sense it...

We are not and never were charlatans—we did not pawn our gift. Our little group, such as it was, did not really care for each other that much. We cared about another world inhabited by tormented souls that could find no peace. We never appeared on stage or performed group readings as many of our, so-called, contemporaries did. To us the people that performed those tricks were nothing more than degenerate fraudsters. We were true psychic mediums who, when we chose, performed one-on-one sessions for sitters. 'Stage' mediums (as we called them), typically performed what they termed 'hot readings'. That is where the 'reader' uses information about the person receiving the reading from background research or overhearing a conversation, which the 'receiver' is not aware of. They usually paired it with 'cold readings'. This involves: observation, psychology, and elicitation, to provide the appearance of psychic powers. For example: 'naming' is a fundamental part of any fraudster's psychic medium reading kit. The so-called medium mentions a common name, in order to find willing subjects for readings. Additional names or initials may be added to narrow down the contenders to a single subject.

Once a subject has been chosen, the fake medium attempts to validate the reading by supplying detail. Firstly, they guess the cause of death. Some mediums claim to be medical intuitives or empathetic, that is, able to feel the physical pain and symptoms of a living or deceased subject's illness, enabling diagnosis, or identification of the cause of death. They will feign a heart attack, or a degenerative disease like cancer. All they need is continuing validation. The thing is that the people believe this rubbish because... they want to believe it. These fraudsters will by then have identified what that person wants to hear, and will tell them exactly that.

With respect to myself: I spend a lot of time fermenting my soul. What I did was real, dangerous for me, and dangerous for the person who sought contact. The cost of hiring me may seem outlandish, but like they say: 'you get what you pay for'. It was not long before I had a client seek me out. It was in the usual manner: go-betweens, between go-betweens, until they actually reached me. I am pretty sure I am never what they expect. To start with: before I chose to represent them in the spirit world their particular case had to appeal to me. I was not interested in their cash, no matter how much they offered me. I had enough of the stuff. It was of little consequence how much money you possessed on the mortal plane. It would not buy you a guaranteed good time in the spirit world. And something or someone there already had it in for me. A something, I would rather face here and now on the Earthly plane—where it would be weakest. I knew I would be risking my mortal life, but I sensed that it could also mean the loss of my immortal life if I didn't act. Either way, I considered I had no choice.

My new client turned out to be a woman in her mid-forties. Her husband had died in a strange way. It was the circumstances of his death that interested me. He had died very suddenly of a heart attack whilst watching television. Nothing too inimical or suspect there, you might think... but he had no previous history of any sort of heart condition, not even high blood pressure. It was the programme he had been watching at the time that interested me. It was a documentary film about Hieronymus Bosch. The same documentary that Daniel, the first of us to die, had been watching when he suffered his attack. According to Carla, who had been mind-linking with him at the time, Daniel had died whilst watching a discussion of Bosch's painting, 'The Last Judgement'. According to my client, a Mrs Mayfield, her husband had died whilst watching the same segment of the programme. She had felt for some while that her deceased husband was trying to contact her. She had strange dreams... premonitions... hallucinations... sometimes, she told me, she had felt someone pinching her whilst she was dozing off to sleep. She feared a poltergeist.

She was dismayed when she learned that my method of making contact with the spirit world involved sexual congress. Perhaps she thought I merely wanted an excuse to fuck her. She was attractive enough, and knew it. She had probably thought we were just going to sit around a felt-covered table holding hands. These are people's normal expectations. She nearly walked out there and then, but she sat whilst I explained it would not involve any kind of physical lust—the less the better, in fact. When I explained to her that anal sex, however painful, would increase the chance of contact, she reddened visibly. But still she did not leave. This was a determined woman. I felt a sort of admiration for her. Mrs Mayfield really wanted, or, really needed, to make contact with her deceased husband. Even my full and illustrative description of the ritual we would perform did not openly disgust her. We arranged a time and date that would be the most conducive to making the connection that she and I both desperately sought, although,

for completely different reasons.

The day came for the ritual. I had prepared carefully for 'The Work'. The room I used for such purposes had been thoroughly cleansed. Thoughtfully, I had bought a tube of lubricant for Mrs Mayfield, which I hoped she would appreciate as the ritual progressed into the sexual phase. I always used Crowley's 'Magick in Theory and Practice' for a formal ritual. She was a bit squeamish about letting her blood, but this was Crowley's true interpretation of the Eucharist and had to be followed properly. I performed the phlebotomy using my tie as a tourniquet, and a medical catheter. Luckily, she had good veins and it was not difficult to find one once she had pumped her fists. The needle was not difficult to insert, and she did not flinch. The goblet filled very rapidly. I removed everything and put a small piece of cotton wool and a plaster on the wound. A practiced nurse could not have done better. I then laid out the bread which we would consume from a small altar. We had both fasted. In accordance with Crowley's Eucharist of the One and Seven: the priest/magician must make his own substitutions for the Church's Eucharist. I substituted wafers with bread laced with my own semen, and replaced the traditional blessed wine with Mrs Mayfield's blood. After we had performed the Magickal Eucharist I had Mrs Mayfield kneel naked before the altar with her arse in the air. I stood behind her in my black Magickal robe stitched with arcane symbols in gold thread and recited:

*'Hail Ra, that goest in thy bark
Into the caverns of the Dark!'*

I gave the sign of silence, and took the Bell and Fire (a disposable lighter), in my hands.

*'East of the Altar see me stand
With light and musick in my hand!
I strike the Bell: I light the Flame;
I utter the mysterious Name.
ABRAHADABRA.'*

I struck the Bell eleven times and cried:

'ABRAHADABRA.

*'I entered in with woe; with mirth
I now go forth, and with thanksgiving,
To do my pleasure on the earth
Among the legions of the living.'*

I undid my robe. Out reared my stiffened phallus. My entry into Mrs Mayfield's anus was very difficult, even with the aid of the lubricant. But we persevered. I was impressed that she didn't cry out in pain. I knew the ritual would usually cause waves through the esoteric world, but I had prepared carefully—we were inside a sanctified pentagram. Whatever took place within it... remained there, even Carla would not be aware of it.

It was with a beating heart, and not just because of the sexual intercourse, that I finally made

contact. It was my 'gatekeeper', Grimwood, a pragmatic spirit, who always carried out my requests submissively. In life he had been some sort of hermit. Perhaps he made up for his lack of human contact during his mortality by now being in contact with a living soul. I bid him seek out the deceased Mayfield. Recent 'deads' were far easier to locate in the spirit world than the long deceased. As Grimwood went about his questing I concentrated on Mrs Mayfield—it was time for me to reach orgasm. She still did not cry out even when I thrust harder and faster. I groaned in satisfaction when I climaxed, not just out of physical pleasure, but in the pleasure of finally being in full contact.

I found myself in white space. I could now feel Grimwood's presence completely. He had brought the spirit of Mayfield with him. In this state I was just an objective observer. Spirits were invisible, but their presence was as unique as a human fingerprint. He spoke through me to Mrs Mayfield on the Earthly plane. I watched my body, now Mr Mayfield's vessel, from afar, adopt his mannerisms and voice, as if I were watching actors on stage performing a version of my script. Mrs Mayfield was laying, prostrate and naked, as I'd left her. My empty body-shell was kneeling at her side.

'It's me,' her husband said through my mouth. His voice would not be quite the same, of course, because of our different vocal chords. But the intonations were enough for Mrs Mayfield to immediately recognise her husband. Their conversation was of no interest to me at first. It was the usual, banal lamenting of one passing and the other being left behind.

It was all tosh really. In the spirit world it hardly mattered at all if you had been close either by blood or by marriage. Only true mediums had a semblance of what that cold timeless state meant. Although we did not shed our mortal coils, we could enter the 'waiting room' or 'limbo'—experienced as white space. There was also dark space, a place inhabited by only the most tormented souls who could not reconcile themselves to death. Most of us shared an innate, mortal terror of it. Thankfully, none of us had ever made contact there, or at least lived to tell the tale. I personally, feared that the lack of communication from our mortally deceased colleagues was because they were trapped in that dark space. I kept this intuition to myself, fearing to be scoffed at by Carla. She considered dark space to be a mortal projection of our personal fears, and not part of the spirit world at all.

The Mayfield's boring conversation suddenly changed. My mortal/spirit ears pricked up as it were. Mrs Mayfield inquired why the programme about Bosch's paintings, in particular: 'The Last Judgement', had led to his sudden heart attack. Or had it been something else entirely? I could physically feel the hesitation as he tried to answer.

'It's not as you imagine. Things are hidden from us when we are mortals for a reason... all will be revealed,' was his enigmatic answer. 'Bosch opened a curtain for me to view a different world. I suddenly realised it was in fact the real world we inhabited. I was blind... he made me see. It was too, too much. We are not made to realise such things when alive.' He promptly ceased contact. The white space faded, and I was back with Mrs Mayfield on the mortal plane. She looked stunned which was quite normal for someone when they experienced their first contact. I reorganised my robe, and passed her some tissues. She murmured some sort of thanks... cleaned herself without looking at me. Then she slowly stood. Her legs were trembling,

I noticed. Shyly, carefully, she dressed herself. I guessed her arse must be hurting like hell, but she hid it well.

‘It really was him, wasn’t it?’ she asked.

‘It was his spirit, yes.’

‘Can we do it again?’

They all asked that.

‘We can, but on one condition—you ask some questions I would like answered,’ I told her.

She agreed eagerly, and we set a date. She walked rather tentatively to the front door, as if testing the strength of her legs. It was quite obvious it was the first time she had indulged in anal sex. Still, it would be easier for her next time—she would know what to expect.

I went to our next group ‘meeting’ even though I was not much inclined to do so. Carla presided as usual. We went through pretty much the same routine as last time. A lot of speechifying by Carla. The necessity of not making contact, of remaining off the grid blah, blah, blah.... Throughout, I could have sworn she was staring directly at me whenever she reiterated NOT making contact. I couldn’t help wondering if she knew.

Whatever her dire warnings accomplished in keeping us safe, it was all swept away when Gloria died. She died of a heart attack. Just like our other two colleagues. But this time it was in public—Tate Britain in Pimlico. She was viewing a John Martin exhibition. Another artist who specialised in religious and biblical paintings, especially, on an apocalyptic scale. Gloria, an attractive and intelligent Italian woman, had been an avid art lover. It seemed to be a particularly cruel way for her to die. We all now agreed there must be a connection between these works of art and the deaths, but still Carla refused my suggestion that we work in unison to contact our deceased colleagues. Instead, she proposed that we now avoided any sort of religious-based art! A preposterous, nay, ridiculous suggestion given the circumstances. Anyway, how can one avoid religious-based art? I was incredulous when my peers meekly accepted her proposal or should I say order.

I, however, soldiered on with Mrs Mayfield and her all too tight anus. I had made sure she knew by heart all the questions I wished her to ask. At the first sign that contact might be wavering she was to change to a less inquisitive line of questioning. I did not want us to suddenly lose contact as we had last time.

This time we made contact very quickly. Mrs Mayfield knew the routine and Grimwood knew where to look. I felt the familiar raw ecstasy of connection flooding through me. Mrs Mayfield had learnt her role in the sex department very well. She was bucking like a mule, rubbing her buttocks against my scrotum and groaning with pretended pleasure—all designed to make me climax as soon as possible. Which she duly did... I entered white space.

She tackled the line of questioning very well, almost casually. She did not falter when she introduced my first question, ‘Had he met any spirits who had recently died in the same fashion as himself?’ I had described my colleagues carefully to her, although, of course, they would not now be corporeal but many of their mortal characteristics would be retained within their spirits. To my delight, he answered in the affirmative. He had met every one of my ex-colleagues. They had formed some sort of cadre on the spiritual plane, if such a thing were possible. They sympathised with each other, I suppose.

Mrs Mayfield moved seamlessly to the next question—an important one, ‘What was the connection between the works of art they had been viewing and their deaths?’

The connection was immediately snapped off as if a light switch had been thrown, quicker even than last time. I shook my head to clear my thoughts. The suddenness off it had caught me off balance. Mrs Mayfield and I stared at each other. There and then we agreed to try again the very next day.

I now had a plan. A very dangerous plan. I went out the very next day and bought large poster works by Hieronymus Bosch: The Garden of Earthly Delights, The Last Judgment, Hell and the Flood, Visions of the Hereafter and The Haywain. All of the triptychs were complete. I surrounded my ritual space with them. One of the posters at each of the cardinal points of the chalked pentagram. At the centre, the naked Mrs Mayfield would take her place on all fours before the altar. I would mount her from behind, dressed in my ceremonial robes. I had inscribed arcane symbols inside the pentagram to protect us, although, it would principally be me who was in danger.

Mrs Mayfield was slightly perturbed when she saw what I had done. She was concerned for my safety—I couldn’t help feeling slightly touched. I decided I would try to be extra gentle.

Connection was once again immediate. Grimwood went about his task as efficiently as before. Mayfield’s presence soon made itself known. But something was happening to the white space surrounding me. Something bad... It was changing into Bosch’s nightmare landscapes and I was being dragged into them! I desperately tried to sever the connection and return to the Earthly plane. But I was like a tired swimmer swimming against a powerful ebb tide. It was no use. I gave up and went with the flow. If Bosch’s paintings were disturbing to look at—they were absolutely terrifying to inhabit. The nightmare land was full of horrific, foul hybrids. Most of them were half human and half animal. The plants and trees were equally monstrous. They grew in strange proportions and flowered hideous misshapen things, or bore fruits that were part human. Weird Willy Wonka-like machines armed with huge mandibles and claws patrolled the upper regions, brooking no escape.

Then I saw something even worse than these abominations: some of the heads of the bizarre beasts that inhabited that unnatural place had Carla’s features, distorted in the most horrible fashion. These gruesome, hermaphrodite brutes were hideous beyond belief. If I had had the power to scream in that nightmare, I would have screamed myself hoarse. The composite creatures, carrying Carla’s face, wandered here and there inflicting terrible torments on the humans. They would rip the flesh apart of any human unluckily enough to be caught and devour

them alive. I felt as if I had been transported into the very pit of Hell, and it was commanded by Carla.

A huge owl-headed monster with Carla's features, the legs of a woman, and the arms of a man homed in on me. The owl opened its enormous hooked, scimitar-like beak. It was going to tear me apart and eat me. I tried to run, but it was like moving through thick molasses. It was akin to running in a dream where you can't get your body to move in the direction or speed you want. I was remaining still whilst the world moved around me. I felt like I was being sucked into its terrible maw. An unspeakable stench of rotting flesh and decay assailed my psychic nostrils. But instead of devouring me the owl/Carla creature screeched at me. 'I warned you! I warned you!'

Yes, Carla had warned me—so I had come prepared. I made a 'summoning' and in my hands an easel and paintbrush appeared. I started painting over the face of a small pig-like thing that had Carla's nose instead of a snout.

'What are you doing?' the owl shrieked. It flapped its man arms as if it were trying to fly. I went mad, like an artist on a speed rush, daubing over anything with Carla's face. Her power began to fade and the creatures began to turn on her. The owl attempted to fly to safety, uselessly flapping its human arms. It was to no avail—the creatures were closing in. The owl/Carla hooted in terror, and finally in supplication as they overwhelmed it.... I was back in white space, and I felt the familiar tug of the Earthly plane. I returned....

Mrs Mayfield was just sitting there looking bewildered.

'He spoke to me, but not through you. He forgave me...'

'Forgave you for what?' I said through chattering teeth. I was still trembling from my ordeal.

'For being unfaithful to him. You see... I was...'

The whole story came tumbling out: Mrs Mayfield had been having an affair for years. Her husband never confronted her about it, but did not have sexual relationships with her ever again. That made her want the attentions of her lover even more, and gave her an excuse to justify them. She had felt secure in the knowledge that it was her own guilty secret and she was not hurting her husband. What the eye doesn't see (sic).... But she was causing him much more pain than she could have guessed. He had sought refuge and comfort in religious art. He was watching the documentary when he saw the women in the picture take on his wife's face.

It had suddenly dawned on him that for all the secret resentment he had nurtured against her he did not want her to suffer those terrible torments—he still loved. And she now realised how deeply she still loved and missed him. She had been fooling herself. She never really wanted anyone else. She would stop seeing her lover... she would wait to be reunited with her husband. She was finally at peace, and at long last truly happy again. She left, even leaving me a bonus! Not that I was in any condition to notice.

I was still bewildered. What had been Carla's game? Then it came to me: Carla had always

wanted to be the one—the acknowledged leader, not just a make-do temporary captain like a substitute teacher. She knew that given our personalities she could never be a true kingpin. So she had re-designed her own white space in the limbo between the spirit and Earthly planes. There she could rule as she pleased—in the cruellest way. She laid traps for us. She must have prized the freshly acquired spirits of her former colleagues above all else. And she had come close, so close, to gaining mine. I instinctively knew that she was gone from the Earthly plane permanently now. I had always sensed her presence and it was no longer there. No doubt they would find a corpse. The autopsy would reveal a heart attack, and that would be the end of the matter. The others would retreat further into their shells, like so many redundant hermit crabs, never to wander the spirit plane again. She, however, was trapped in her own portrait of hell with no means of escape unless I chose to set her free. Which I had no intention of doing. I had my own plans....

THE END

[Cyrus Song](#)



Cyrus Song

Steve Laker

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THE SALTED EARTH by Paul Lubaczewski

Morning. Well, afternoon really. Noah toddled out of bed to find something approaching food. His room opened right on to the kitchen, so it wasn't a mighty quest. Noah dug a bowl out of the cabinet. Well, they used them for bowls, but they were really old margarine tubs. Whatever worked, you got them for free, and you got margarine for your toast as a bonus. He poured some water into it and grabbed the big cardboard box of powdered milk, sifted some in and swirled it around a bit to create a thin white approximation of milk. Add some generic Cheerios from a big plastic sack, voila, breakfast. Reaching over, he also grabbed a mug, filling it with the cold coffee that was waiting there for him, and adding some more of the powdered milk. It took more than a few moments with a spoon to break up the white clumps in the cup, but it was gross to get a full clump, so it was worth the effort.

Walking around the barrier that separated the kitchen, Noah went into the living room and flopped down on the couch to eat breakfast and drink his coffee. Remote in hand he turned on the TV. They barely could afford cable so the pickings were slim. He had no idea why, but Nickelodeon was on the package. It was supposed to be extra, but he certainly wasn't going to complain. Noah turned that on, confident he could change it to something else when his brother got home. If he didn't change it before his brother saw, Dylan would tease the hell out of him and call him a baby.

Since Noah had gotten up late, it was slightly better programming. Early morning really was for babies. Something really dumb and inoffensive that parents could park their little poop machines in front of while they got ready for work. A pacifier until their little bundles of responsibilities could be scooped up and whisked away to whatever day-care the folks could afford. Afternoon, they had layabouts in mind, and Noah was one today. Last of the hay had come in last week, and he had an actual weekend day free, instead of slaving all day in the heat for his cheap ass relatives, for a whopping ten bucks of spending money.

Noah ate his food. He considered, for the millionth time, the irony of it all. Most of the family land was leased out to dairy farmers, and what wasn't littered with cows, was growing hay for them, yet here he was using WalMart powdered milk for his cereal. But there was nothing in the contracts that said anything about fresh milk for growing boys, was there? The farm was why they were even here. Noah and Dylan hadn't been born to this, even if they had gotten used to it by now. All it took was their grandmother dying without a will. The family had fought like vicious animals over the property, Noah still sometimes had nightmares about them in the kitchen, screaming at each other for every inch of land. At the end of it, his Mom had suddenly owned thirteen acres and a mule, well, not a mule, but definitely the thirteen acres. She could have sold the land—she probably should have sold it, but she didn't. Somehow, and he wasn't to this day sure how she had scabbled together the money for this shitty used trailer.

By the time Mom had passed away from cancer, the family was at least back on speaking terms again. Same reason as why they fell apart in the first place, money. All it took was realizing that each of their little thirteen-acre plots were only good for developers and tax debts as they sat, but pooled together they could be a steady income in lease payments from the local dairy farms looking to expand their grazing lands on the cheap.

The family had really come together when Mom died. They stuck by Noah and Dylan so they wouldn't lose their home, or be broken up by being sent into foster homes. It had taken a lot of long hours, but Dylan had been declared emancipated at 16; their Uncle Roger, a church deacon, had been declared Noah's legal guardian until Noah had turned 18, even though Noah had not so much as packed a pair of socks and a toothbrush to move in with Uncle Roger. The only change had been Dylan had taken Mom's room as his own.

After Noah finished his cereal he threw the bowl into the sink over the counter that acted like a divider between the kitchen and the living room. The bowl landed in the sink, but the spoon landed with a loud metallic clang off the metal. Noah groaned as he heard it bounce onto the floor. He could possibly get away with not washing his bowl, but even Dylan would ream him out for a spoon on the floor, brother or no.

Noah went into the kitchen to pick up the spoon and get another cup of coffee. As he stirred in the powdered milk, his eyes travelled down the trailers sole hallway to rest on the door to his brother's room. He wondered to himself if he should check on their "guest", but wrote the idea off. There was no way he was going into his brother's room. He had gone in there once to borrow a fiver, and had never heard the end of it. His brother liked having his own room. Dylan had to share the other room with Noah when they first moved here, he relished having his own space and privacy now. No, it was just better to enjoy his coffee and watch the TV.

Noah was just getting into the cartoon re-run on the TV when he heard a distant rumble. Somebody coming down the long dirt road that led to their trailer. Noah got up quickly and looked up the road to see who was coming. Crap! it was Dylan. Noah dove for the remote and changed the channel intermediately over to some lame sitcom re-runs.

Noah settled himself into the couch in a hurry. He wanted it to look as casual as possible. Dylan knew him well enough if Noah looked at all rushed or flustered when he got in, he'd bust on him. Say something along the lines of "Spanking it to SpongeBob again? Don't worry, one of these days we'll get Cinemax unscrambled so you can see a titty!" He might be his guardian, but he was still his older brother.

The door banged open and Dylan came in smiling. Dylan smiled a lot. It wore well on his tan face, but everything did, Noah thought with a tinge of jealousy. "Glad to see your up squirt, I hate kicking you outta bed. How're things at the ol' manure factory?"

"I just finished breakfast, so I'm still deciding," Noah replied, smiling at the joke.

"Man, it's gonna be a big night tonight! I figured you'd be raring to go," Dylan said heading for the refrigerator.

"I don't know, I guess I don't get into stuff like that as much as you." Noah shrugged even if Dylan couldn't see him from the kitchen.

"Trust me, it's gonna be great," Dylan said as he got half a sandwich he had left over from work,

and a soda out for himself.

A moment later Dylan came out and sat down on the easy chair. Since Mom passed away, it had more or less officially become Dylan's, he set his plate on a beat-up night stand that sat between the couch and the chair. "Watcha watching?"

"I don't know, some old assed sitcom," Noah relied. "You can change it if you want, the clicker is right here." He really didn't care if Dylan changed the channel, he hadn't been watching it anyway.

"Naw, it's as good as anything," Dylan replied around a mouth full of sandwich.

Both of them watched TV in silence for a while, neither of them speaking, the show was lame, but teenage boys will watch almost anything you put in front of them. There are many, many television shows that got long runs, and syndication built off of that fact.

Eventually, Dylan finished his sandwich with a belch. "So, how's our guest been?"

Noah shrugged, "I haven't heard a peep out of her since I got up. So as far as I know, she's fine."

Dylan's face took on a mischievous grin, "So, you try to bone her?"

Noah's face flushed bright red at the mere suggestion. His expression was furious as he replied, "Oh shut up, you know I wouldn't do THAT!"

"She turned ya down, huh?"

"SHUT UP!" Noah yelled as he threw a small pillow from the couch at his brother, who was laughing out loud now.

"I'm just screwing with you, squirt. Chill out." He stopped laughing and smiled at his younger brother.

"You're still a jerk, Dylan," Noah sulked.

"You gotta learn to take a joke, kid." His brother smiled as he got to his feet. "Well, come on, we better go and get her. She's the guest of honour at the service tonight."

"Yeah, OK," said Noah begrudgingly, getting up as well.

Dylan in the lead, both of them headed down the narrow hallway that led past the heater and the bathroom to Dylan's room. When they stepped into the small room they both saw "the guest" lying on the bed. She was a young woman, maybe her mid-twenties. In Noah's eyes, she was an adult, an actual adult not just someone who had just turned eighteen. Maybe she was in Dylan's as well. She was dressed in a light blouse and skirt, a matching red outfit. Her mascara and eyeliner had run all over her face, it had pooled and clumped in dark lines. Her eyes were wide

and she tried to say something neither of them could understand through the duct-tape over her mouth.

“Well, we’re gonna have to get her to the church,” Dylan said, walking up to the head of the bed, “So I need you to give me a hand, buddy. I’ll grab her shoulders, you grab her feet.” When he saw Noah had her feet he called it out, “OK, now one, two, three, and LIFT!”

The girl struggled a little as they lifted her, but she had been struggling for days now. She honestly didn’t have a lot of fight left in her. She was lighter than Noah had expected, but the Priest had given them all a type he wanted for tonight, and he certainly specified “no fat chicks”, without saying it in so many words. Noah suspected in his heart of hearts John Pembrose got off on it being a hot chick for the service. He never said it out loud to anyone; Noah didn’t want anyone to question his faith, he suspected that might be dangerous.

The brothers awkwardly marched down the hall carrying the girl towards the front door. Her skirt briefly hung up on to the knob of the rarely used back door and it took a bit of jiggling for Noah to work it off so they could continue. She would occasionally twitch or struggle, but you could sense that even she knew that if she managed to free herself from their hands temporarily, her own hands and feet were still duct-taped together. All she should really achieve by struggling was getting dropped and hurting herself.

In the living room, they had to set her down altogether so Dylan could open the door and place a cinderblock in front of it so it wouldn’t try to swing shut on them. It took almost no breeze at all to slam the thing shut, causing the whole trailer to shudder with the force of it closing. Picking up their load they headed outside down the cinderblock steps stacked in front.

The trailer was miles from anyone and everyone, just a speck in a patchwork of open fields. Not that it mattered. Everyone close to them was family, and the family would all be at the service tonight. They never missed a one, and since the boys had been brought in to the fold after the death of their mother, neither did they. The trunk of Dylan’s car was already opened for them to deposit their burden and gift for tonight.

They carefully set the girl down inside the trunk, on top of the blankets Dylan had placed inside earlier. Before closing the trunk, Dylan’s face took on a mischievous smile and he said, “Well, we’ll see you later, but we won’t be able to talk, honey. I’d just like to say I’m sorry my little baby brother didn’t have the guts to try and bone you!”

Noah punched him as he was closing the lid. “You are such an ASSHOLE, Dylan!”

There were muffled screams from the girl as they closed the trunk, but it didn’t worry either of them as they got in the car to go. It was nothing but country roads between here and the place of the Harvest Sacrifice, all patrolled by good church going folks like themselves. She’d tire herself out soon anyway.

“Be careful driving, huh?” Noah said as they began driving up the lane that led from their trailer, “you hurt her and Pembrose is likely to have us strapped down to the altar tonight.”

“Awww darn, Squirt,” Dylan teased. “I was planning to drive recklessly with lots of sharp turns and sudden stops to rattle things around!”

“I take it back. You are not an asshole,” Noah grinned, “you are a TOTAL asshole!”

As the car drove up the long dirt drive, already the sun had moved beyond the small forest their fields abutted, sending golden rays cascading down on the mowed hay fields and the hedgerows that separated them. Two boys, who life had given a rough time, who worked hard, got by, kept their noses clean, both of them faithful, dutiful churchgoers, driving off through the afternoon, and into the great American heartland to give due obedience and praise to their God.

THE END

[Schlock! Presents: Ghostlands](#)

Ghostlands



A Book of Ghost Stories

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THE CELLAR DWELLERS by Steven Havelock

Emily Stone jerked upright in bed. What had awoken her? That noise—what had it been? Like a small earthquake. It made her feel dizzy and confused.

Next to her, her husband David stirred.

“Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” he mumbled in his sleep.

She lay there a second. Again! Something moved, a noise...an echo...coming from downstairs. She looked at her husband. Only he could sleep through an earthquake, she thought.

She got out of bed.

“We’ve been in this house only a week and we’re already experiencing strange happenings.”

Matt Smith headed down to the cellar where he kept his loaded shotgun.

Why did she do it? Oh God, why? My wife cheated on me and now she was gone...No more would I see her cheeky smile, the smile that spread such joy in the pit of my stomach, the first time I had seen it. We had been married three years and we were all set to have a baby...and then...and then...she was no longer here with me.

As he sat in the dark dankness of the cellar, illuminated by a single bulb, a tear came to his eye.

Oh, my poor wife, here no more! No longer with me!

He stared down at the photos of his wife; she was with a man, a man he did not know. They were at a restaurant, eating and laughing.

Emily quietly slipped down the stairs in her nightdress, her heart pounding and her ears alert to the sound that seemed to be calling her, drawing her nearer and nearer alike a fly in a spider’s web.

Matt saw the nightmarish scene of hell before him, but he was in another, more personal hell.

My poor wife ...No more...

He turned and saw his body, his dead body on the floor behind him. The shotgun lying next to him. Why? Why? he asked again and again but received no answer from his wife or any other being.

Emily opened the cellar door. A dank musty smell wafted up to her nostrils.

My heart feels like a jack hammer

She descended the dank steps.

Matt looked up.

A lady! Dressed in white, like my wife! But not my wife...

Emily saw the apparition. It glowed a ghostly white. It was standing in front of a white wardrobe. The doors of the wardrobe flapped and rattled as if caught in a strong gale force wind.

That's the sound that awoke me.

Matt replayed the events again in his mind.

My wife cheated! He tricked her to come down into this cellar, saying there was something he wanted to show her. He saw her face again as he had shown her the photos. She had denied it of course, but then. But then... her eyes had widened in terror as he had pulled out the shotgun from the wardrobe.

There had only been one shot.

Then Matt had placed the gun in his mouth. There had been one more shot.

The wardrobe had started to glow a hellish orange, and their spirits had descended, down and down, to the mountain ridges and plateaus that burnt bright in the hellish sun and teemed with demonic entities, entities to terrifying to describe.

Emily saw the apparition sucked into the wardrobe and in an instant the hellish sight before her had disappeared. The wardrobe was just an ordinary wardrobe again. Her curiosity peaked she continued down the stairs until she was standing in front of it.

Beware!

A voice inside her head! But she had to see what lay in the wardrobe. She opened it. Then a few moments' later tears streamed down her cheeks. Her blood ran cold, her eyeballs bulged.

“No!”

She saw David descending the stairs, as white as a sheet of bedding. He came closer and closer. Emily did not move. Tears streamed down her cheeks in silence. Then she handed David the photos.

He looked at them in shock.

“No!” His voice was raspy and dry. “Where did you get these?”

Emily reached for something in the back of the wardrobe. David screamed as Emily pulled the trigger of the shotgun.

Blown against the wall his dead body slumped down, his eyes stared, dead and dying. Emily brought the gun up to her mouth and pulled the trigger.

She saw her husband's spirit. Their eyes stared at each other's in unbelieving shock.

Then the portal to hell opened once more and screaming and shaking they were sucked down to the hellish mountain ridges and plateaus of the red-orange hell below.

Demonic entities charged at them and they turned and fled...

They reached the edge of a cliff. The demonic entities so close to them...so close. Then like rag dolls all four jumped from the cliff face, into a fiery lava lake below.

A few weeks later the house was up for sale. A young, newly married, couple had bought it. That night Jenny heard a sound come from downstairs.

What the hell was that? There it was again...

She nudged her husband, but he did not stir.

Nothing for it but to go and see for myself...

Matt Smith stood in front of the wardrobe, like he had done yesterday and the day before and the day before that. He saw the door of the wardrobe slowly sliding open, he saw a wide expanse of

mountains and plateaus, but what struck him the most was the fiery miasma that encompassed it all. Everywhere there were people fleeing from strange entities, too demonic to describe... His eyes blinked rapidly...

There was a woman on the stairs of the cellar, staring at them in shock.

He felt the presence of three others behind him. The demonic entities were almost upon them. They fled towards the cliff edge.

THE END

The background of the cover is a photograph of a woman and a young child. The woman is holding a large, dark, textured axe over her face, partially obscuring it. The child is looking over the woman's shoulder. The overall tone is dark and mysterious.

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SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE BEAST-MEN OF ATLANTIS by Milly “Mad Dog”
McGuigan

Chapter Seven

The African coast brooded beneath a blazing sun.

The air shimmered above the surf as we came in from the ship anchored out in the roadstead. The heat was intense, greater even than India. I felt weak and listless, and the wounds I had received at Maiwand troubled me. The glossy black hides of the native Kroomen shone in the sunlight as they busied themselves about the boat, naked but for turban and loincloth. Holmes removed his hat—once we’d passed Tenerife he had exchanged deerstalker for solar topee—and mopped at his brow. We exchanged glances. I brushed the sweat from my moustache, then turned to our fair companion.

Miss Marency gave us an enthusiastic smile, twirled her parasol between her white gloved hands, and indicated the shore.

‘Isn’t Africa beautiful, gentlemen?’ she said gaily. ‘Oh,’ she added, taking in a deep breath, ‘you can smell the cloves from here!’

I inhaled gingerly, but all I could detect on the salt breeze was a distant odour of rot, no doubt originating in a mangrove swamp. Beside me, Sherlock Holmes breathed a sigh of distaste and fanned at his long, gaunt face.

It had taken us a little over two weeks’ sail to get to British West Africa, setting out from Liverpool the day after Sir Digory’s funeral was held at the parish church, attended by half the county. Despite the wicked ways of the Bad Baronet, the Marency family was popular, and Sir Digory’s death was widely mourned. It had also attracted the attention of the Press, not only in his home county but across the kingdom, especially when it came to the attention of the evening papers that Holmes had taken on the case. We had set sail for Africa amid much publicity, which had pleased him not in the slightest.

The temperature had grown hotter and hotter the further south we sailed. After reaching the Canary Islands we had shed all vestiges of our cold Northern origins and dressed for hot sun and fair horizons strolled the deck of the Africa steamer on which we had taken passage. Since then the heat, impossibly, it seemed, had grown even greater, and only Miss Marency seemed able to bear it, and even she stayed in her cabin in the middle of the day.

‘It surely is a fair land,’ Holmes remarked, shading his eyes with his long angular hand and scanning the shore. ‘I seem to see the distant blue of mountain peaks, far inland.’

‘Your eyes are good,’ Miss Marency told him, ‘if you can see so far. Those would be the foothills of the Mountains of Kong.’

I produced a map; a larger reproduction of the one Holmes had drawn from memory in the

flyleaf of a book in Marency Hall. Laying it down on the deck, I smoothed it out and examined it.

‘Here are the mountains,’ I said, pointing to the centre of the map. ‘We must ascend them to reach the plateau whereon lies the lost city.’

I looked up and saw Miss Marency staring at the shore. There was a light in her eyes that seemed strangely indelicate in so fine bred a young lady, almost feral. As if the savagery of the scene spoke to a similar wildness in her soul. I remembered what I knew of the horrors of her upbringing and shivered. Holmes remarked this.

‘Let us hope that the expedition physician is not the first to come down with fever,’ he murmured sardonically. It was as if he had a presentiment of what was yet to come.

We came ashore in Nago, a wretched little town of native houses roofed with corrugated iron, and a church with white washed walls, all positioned around a *boma*, or fortified settlement, where the governor was based. Although the Union Flag fluttered bravely above the dusty little parade ground, the governor himself was absent, having taken a division of native soldiery on a punitive expedition against the terrible Dango tribe in the north. We were received instead by one Lieutenant Carruthers, a languorous young man with a monocle and a flywhisk, accompanied by a small native boy who carried a camp stool.

‘I’m afraid we had no word that we would be receiving more white visitors,’ Carruthers told us, standing in the shade of a tamarisk and gesturing to his boy to open up the stool so Miss Marency could sit down on it, ‘Particularly not one so fair,’ he added gallantly, as she settled herself. ‘No doubt your letters went astray. Certainly you’re not the first white folk to pass through in recent days.’

‘The district commissioner, McAllister?’ I suggested.

Carruthers nodded. ‘He landed a week ago, mooring his yacht some miles south down the coast after an absence of some months, a spell of leave. Appeared in Nago, took three native soldiers, and vanished upcountry. Oh, nowhere near Dangoland,’ he added. ‘He wasn’t offering to help the governor. No, he had some hush-hush job to carry out in the bush east of the old mission station.’ He nodded when Miss Marency started at that. ‘I wasn’t here when you departed, miss,’ he told her, ‘but I heard the story. I rather expected a character from one of these new German operas, not the elegant young lady I see before me.’ He gave her a roguish grin, which she was well bred enough to ignore. I fear I bristled somewhat—the fellow’s attentions were offensive. I mopped my brow.

‘McAllister went upcountry, you say.’ I spoke brusquely. ‘Did he say anything of his intentions?’

Carruthers shrugged. ‘As I said,’ he grinned, ‘hush-hush. He did say something about being on the trail of a killer... Funny thing, the other white man to pass this way went in the same direction, I’m told.’

I exchanged glances with Holmes. The audacity of McAllister! To claim that he was pursuing a killer, when it was in fact we who were on his tail.

‘Other white man?’ my friend asked idly. ‘Who was this?’

Carruthers swatted at a fly. There seemed to be any number in the courtyard, no doubt drawn by the native corpses that hung from the gallows beside the parade ground. Holmes didn’t turn a hair at them, and nor did Miss Marency. I wondered what Carruthers meant when he compared our fair companion with a character from a German opera.

‘I didn’t see him,’ Carruthers admitted. ‘This was a little earlier. I was absent meself at the time, oh, not on a punitive expedition,’ he said, ‘but in the hospital in Zeriba, with a touch of fever. By the time I shook it off, the fellow had vanished into the bush. It happens from time to time, you know. Newcomers from more civilised climes, touch of sun, and they seem to go crazy. I’ve lasted six months here without much more than a couple of attacks of fever and a case of chiggers. The company’s infernally boring, though. Enough to drive a chap to drink, but the governor wouldn’t hear of that. I sometimes pop in on the Catholic padre in the settlement for a whiskey or two. Apart from that, it’s all work, work, work,’ he added, swatting languorously at the flies. ‘Are you meaning to stay here long?’

‘No,’ said Miss Marency. ‘We also intend to go upcountry. We mean to hire native bearers and leave as soon as possible.’

Carruthers’ face fell.

We set out three days later, at the head of a column of native bearers, equipped with machetes and long muskets that reminded me of the jezails I had seen carried by the natives in Afghanistan. Holmes, myself, and even Miss Marency carried the last word in Express rifles, and we all wore tropical gear, solar topees, ducks and so forth. Even Miss Marency’s garb was suited to the gruelling nature of the coming trek. It had taken three days. Urgency was something that had yet to be introduced in British West Africa, it seemed.

Carruthers had been unenthusiastic about our expedition, too, although he did everything in his power to ensure we hired the best natives. Miss Marency spoke several of the local languages, and even Holmes could communicate with some of the Muslim tribes, speaking to them in Arabic. Carruthers saw us off that morning, still raising objections, but Miss Marency met each one of them ably, and soon we had left Nago and the coast behind and were marching across miles of grassland and thorn forest.

By the second day of the expedition, following two nights of camping beneath the stars in a hastily erected thorn *boma*, and many hours of weary trudging beneath the hot sun, I felt I was really getting into my stride, despite the pain from my old wounds. Holmes loped alongside me, express rifle slung over his back, keen eyes fixed on the horizon. Miss Marency strode ahead of us, her face demure but her eyes hinting at unguessed depths of emotion.

‘So it seems that McAllister has a week’s advantage on us,’ I said to Holmes. ‘According to the map it is several weeks’ march to the lost city of Nkume. Assuming he reaches it, we are most likely to catch up with him there.’ I indicated the bearers. ‘No doubt our friends will help fight off any opposition. But one thing is troubling me.’

‘This interloper?’ Holmes asked. ‘This mysterious other white man who Carruthers mentions as preceding McAllister?’

I shook my head irritably. ‘No, Holmes,’ I said. ‘The lieutenant explained: white men vanish into the bush from time to time. No doubt some lunatic, on his way to an unfortunate grave. What piques me is McAllister’s claim that he was on the trail of a killer. What the devil did he mean by that?’

Miss Marency dropped back to join us. ‘No doubt the first excuse that came to him,’ she said darkly. ‘My father’s killer has murder on his mind. A sign of his guilt, do you think, Dr Watson?’

‘I am no alienist,’ I protested. ‘The workings of the madman’s mind are a mystery to me.’

‘And yet McAllister seemed entirely sane,’ Holmes said musingly, ‘on brief acquaintance.’

That night we stayed in the deserted fort of the district commissioner, McAllister’s own home in the bush, now a dwelling place only for snakes and scorpions. It seemed fitting, somehow, to me.

The following day, and for many days, our journey took us far across the veldt and through the thorn forests. From time to time, we encountered police patrols, native askaris for the most part, with the occasional white officer. These officers seemed to disapprove of the direction of our expedition, and warned us from going too far upcountry. No very clear reasons were given, but the tribes in those parts, we heard, were restless. After one of these encounters, Holmes and I begged Miss Marency to reconsider accompanying us in the expedition, but she would not listen.

‘You would hardly expect me to return to the coast alone,’ was the clinching point of her argument.

Onwards we marched. As the landscape opened up in all its exotic beauty I relaxed, and my fears of the dark heart of Africa receded. The heat became bearable as I grew accustomed to it, the sight of black faces, blacker than any in India, no longer seemed so strange. The hunting was good; the plains were thick with game, gazelles and springboks, zebra and elephant. My own shooting proved unsuccessful at first, although Holmes was a competent *shikari*, but it was Miss Marency who bagged the most on our hunting expeditions. From Holmes I learnt that the bearers called her *Amotekun Iyaafin*, a native soubriquet that meant ‘Leopard Lady.’

Partway through the journey we reached an area that showed signs of once being cultivated for arable purposes. An overgrown ruin stood in the midst, and Miss Marency, shedding the first tear I had seen from her eyes, told us that this was the site of her father’s mission.

Ever as we advanced across the veldt, the blue distant peaks became clearer and more distinct, no longer shimmering on the skyline like mountains seen in a dream, they grew to become high towers of rock and ice, the latter almost unbelievable in the heat. But one day we crossed a ridge, having fought our way through a gallery forest on the banks of a downward flowing stream, and from that ridge we saw, far below us, the winding coils of the Nago River, and the verdant jungle that swathed its banks and draped the land around for many day's marches. It stood between us and the snow-capped mountains of that eternal African skyline.

That night, as we sat around a campfire on the lower slopes of the valley, within scenting distance of mangrove swamps, we held with the native bearers what in America is known as a powwow, but all old Africa hands call a palaver.

Ngoma, the grizzled, bearded old chieftain who led the bearers, sat before us, the firelight glimmering gold on his dark limbs as he gesticulated, striking highlights from the lion tooth necklace he wore round his neck, while shadows pooled on the leopard skin loincloth that was the sum total of his other garb. He clutched his assegai in one hand, his trade musket in the other, and his face was earnest. I trusted the fellow from the kinky wool of his head to his splayed feet, though I understood not a word he uttered. Holmes followed some of his speech, while Miss Marency understood his tongue and spoke it fluently, both in translation and in rebuttal.

'What is he saying, Holmes?' I whispered.

My friend did not look at me immediately. The fire played upon the fine bones of his nose and fleshless face as he listened intently to Ngoma as he spoke at length. The other bearers sat behind their chieftain, looking sullen and sanctimonious, while Miss Marency, that veritable English Rose, palavered volubly with them.

Holmes' eyes narrowed. 'Mr Ngoma tells us that he and his people were not informed of our final destination,' he translated. 'We were to take you into the interior, he says, but now we fear that you would have us venture into unfathomable mystery. Through the lands of hostile tribes will we march, trusting in the white man and his juju, but some countries we will not visit, for they are taboo to us. These are lands ruled by the gods who came from the Western Ocean, many more lifetimes ago than the days we have marched since leaving Nago.'

'Does the fellow refer to Nkume?' I asked breathlessly. 'Does he mean this race of priests of which Sir Digory spoke?'

Holmes looked at me. Miss Marency was speaking at length to the old black, and Holmes' words were almost drowned out by their jabber. 'So it seems. Certainly, the people of the coast have learnt to fear the dwellers in the mountains.'

'Will they no longer aid us, then?' I asked him fearfully. I had counted on these folk to assist us when we reached the lost city. Assuming it was not all a mirage, a hoax. Perhaps we would find nothing, and nor would the man we followed. Perhaps McAllister would die of exposure on some mountain peak, seeking fruitlessly for this African Eldorado.

Holmes did not answer immediately. Holding up a hand for silence, he listened intently to Miss Marency's discussion with the grizzled chief. I watched also, shaking my head in wonder at this young lady's ability to negotiate with savage folk.

'Miss Marency holds weight in these parts,' Holmes said at last. The discussion had broken up, Ngoma had retired to his kinsfolk to drink jar after jar of the sweet local beer, and our fair companion had walked to the edge of the firelight beyond which stood the musket bearing sentries. 'She has persuaded our guides to remain with us.' His face twisted. 'My facility with languages failed me here. I cannot understand what it was that changed Mr Ngoma's mind; something Miss Marency said persuaded him against abandoning us. Fatalistically as any Mussulman, he accepted his duty to lead us on into the bush. But the last he said suggested to me that he disclaimed responsibility for the consequences.'

Troubled by Holmes' words, I went to consult Miss Marency, but she refused to speak to me, turning away and snarling like the leopard for which the natives named her. Bewildered, I returned to the fire to find that Holmes had wrapped himself in his bedroll and sought the boon of sleep.

In my case, sleep evaded me for much of that night.

Chapter Eight

By the middle of the next afternoon, when, although the sun was riding high in the sky we were searching for somewhere to spend the dark hours of night, we were already amongst the mangroves that grew in the swamps on the edge of the River. Water sloshed around my puttees as I waded after Holmes. Everything was still and silent, except for the occasional calls of circling birds high above.

'What kind of birds are they?' I asked. Their widespread wings made me dread the answer.

'Vultures,' said Miss Marency from behind me, confirming my worst suspicions. 'Watch out!' she added quickly, whipping out her machete to point with it. The long dark sinuous shape of a snake swam through the swamp water in the shade of the nearest mangrove.

As I leapt backwards, sending up a great bow wave of spray, I heard a roar of laughter from our native bearers. Scowling and brushing the mud off my ducks I returned to the trail. I saw Holmes shaking his head, and shot him a resentful glance.

The heat grew less as the day drew towards evening. At last we found firmer ground closer to the River, a spit of land leading back towards the slopes, thick with vegetation. Hacking through this with our machetes, we found a clearing where we erected shelters to wait out the night. Guards were posted to keep watch on all sides of the clearing while the other bearers rested and ate their provisions of ship's biscuit and bully beef. I sat with my back to a tree, watching the steam rise from my sopping boots, listening to Holmes and Miss Marency discussing the route.

Holmes laid the map down on a convenient stump of wood and smoothed it out. 'We must be approximately here,' he said.

I leaned over. He was pointing at an area almost in the middle of the map. This surprised me a little. During our long trek across the veldt it had seemed we were getting nowhere.

'So we've made good progress,' I commented.

Miss Marency sat on her haunches, cleaning her machete. She inspected a nick in the blade, then began to sharpen it. 'Good enough,' she said without looking up. 'But we still have far to go. And now that we have reached the swamps and the jungles, we can anticipate much harder travel.'

'Indeed,' Holmes agreed, mopping fastidiously at his brow. 'The march across the veldt has been arduous but wading through the swamp will be much harder. However, once we reach the river proper it should be possible for us to construct canoes and make our way upstream until we reach these falls here'—he pointed at the map again— 'where we will be forced to walk. After that, we will be entering the highland zone of the Mountains of Kong.'

'And what then, I wonder,' I said. I glanced over to where several of our bearers lay in the shadows, resting and talking quietly amongst themselves. 'And how far will we be able to depend upon our native friends?'

Miss Marency looked determined. 'If their superstitions discourage them,' she said darkly, 'we must make a show of strength.' Her slim hand curled round the butt of her Express rifle.

One of the natives who had been on guard duty came running into the clearing. His hands were white around the stock of his musket, while the whites of his eyes were very visible in his black face.

He ran up to Miss Marency and made a hurried report. She rose to her feet, took up her Express, and loaded it hurriedly.

'Trouble?' I asked Holmes in an undertone.

He joined me. 'Get your gun,' he hissed, snapping open his own rifle and slotting in several shells. 'We have company.'

I felt somewhat more secure with the latest word in modern firearms under my arm. I scanned the bush around us, but could see no sign of any threat. There was a movement from the bushes and I raised my rifle, but before I could fire, Holmes reached out a long arm to deter me. Another native ran into sight.

He was making urgent gestures behind him, saying something in his own tongue, speaking quietly. Miss Marency crossed over to us.

‘These fellows are scared out of their wits,’ I told her. ‘What can it be? A lion? A crocodile? Cannibals?’

‘Something worse,’ she said grimly. ‘You want to know what is happening under the very nose of the British Empire? Come with me.’

I exchanged a puzzled look with Holmes, and we both followed Miss Marency into the bush. After many days’ journey through the interior, she had taken to dressing in male garb for the most part, going as far as to don trousers to better facilitate movement under these conditions. Nevertheless, she made a fetching sight as we followed her down a narrow animal trail.

Sounds drifted across the evening air from up ahead. We were some little way from the swamp by now, on ground that did not quake beneath our feet, moving away from the river. It was cool under the trees, and I no longer felt the enervation I had known every noon since coming to this country. As we drew closer, the sounds became clearer. Shouts, and the crack of a whip.

‘This way,’ said Miss Marency, gesturing away from the path.

We followed her through a thorn brake, coming out at last at the crest of a little rise that gave us a view of another trail, wider than the animal trail. Even as we came out of the trees, I saw a procession crossing ahead of us. Miss Marency halted, and gestured urgently for us to take cover. We moved back into the trees. I looked at Holmes. He was watching the scene with a look of cold anger.

‘You wanted to know what scared the natives so, Watson,’ he said. ‘Look! Here we are, just beyond the British sphere of influence. And you can see quite how much influence the British government has.’ I licked my lips, which were dry, and nodded.

The sight sickened me.

Staggering down the trail, hands bound securely to a long pole, was a line of black men, women, and even children, their bodies emaciated and covered in sores, clad in ragged loincloths and little else. Accompanying them were bearded men clad in long, flowing white robes, carrying sheathed scimitars and loaded muskets. Several of them also had long *sjamboks*, whips made of hippopotamus hide, and even as we watched, one of the Arab slavers brought his whip curling down to strike an ailing captive. I moved involuntarily to aim my rifle and open fire, but again Holmes deterred me.

‘Better that we do not draw attention to ourselves,’ he murmured.

‘But Holmes!’ I protested. ‘Those are slavers!’

‘We’re here to find my father’s murderer,’ Miss Marency reminded me. ‘Not to crusade against slavery.’

I watched the passing of the coffle in miserable silence. ‘And this is still happening?’ I asked. ‘In the 1880s? Within a few days’ march of a British colony?’

Miss Marency nodded. ‘It still happens. And worse. Remember my father’s experiences upcountry. This is not a civilised land, Dr Watson.’

I watched in horror as the pathetic captives staggered onwards out of sight, surrounded by laughing, bearded Arabs whose whips lashed out to give encouragement even as I watched.

‘Where will they be sold?’ I asked hopelessly.

Miss Marency shrugged. ‘They will be marched north across the desert and into the Bilad al-Soudan,’ she said. ‘Perhaps they will be sold to the Mahdi’s followers, perhaps elsewhere. We can do nothing. We are heavily outnumbered.’ She turned to leave, then froze.

Holmes wheeled round, and I followed him at once, clumsily trying to lift my rifle. But then I halted. The small group of white robed Arabs who had crept up on us unawares were all pointing loaded flintlocks directly at us. Our weaponry was superior. But these scouts had the advantage.

Holmes spoke curtly in Arabic. One of them, a grinning rogue with a vast beard and barely a tooth in his head, salaamed, and spoke at length. He concluded with a gesture of invitation. ‘What the devil do they want, Holmes?’ I demanded.

Holmes shouldered his rifle, gesturing to Miss Marency and myself to do the same. ‘I believe he’s inviting us to speak with his sheik,’ said Miss Marency. ‘Isn’t that right, Mr Holmes?’

‘Indeed so,’ Holmes replied. ‘I have heard tales of the hospitality of the Arabs. I hoped one day to sample it, but I had not envisaged such conditions as these. But it seems we have no choice. Lower your gun, Watson. We have a supper appointment in the tent of Sheik Abu Murra.’

The grinning leader of the scouts gestured with his musket and we followed his men down onto the trail.

A quarter of an hour later, we reached another clearing, larger than the one in which we had halted, which was dotted with tents, and had an enclosure crudely stockaded with cut thorn bushes, within which crouched the black slaves. But it was not to this *boma* of misery that our hosts—captors—led us, but to the largest tent of all, a pavilion worthy of an Arthurian knight, where two more musket bearing Mussulmen stood on guard. Elsewhere in the compound, other Arabs were resting and eating their midday meal.

Greetings were exchanged with the guards on the tent, and the tent flap was drawn back, and we were ushered inside. Within the tent was another world. A scented paradise whose floor was paved with Persian rugs and Turcoman carpets, in the midst of which reclined a tall, thin man with a long nose who resembled nothing so much as an Arab rendition of Holmes. For a moment I wondered if he was a long-lost brother. Slaves tended to him, and he was smoking bhang or opium from an elaborate hookah. We stood in the entrance, the scouts behind us.

Without waiting for an invitation, Holmes strode forwards, then bowed, touching heart, lips and forehead. '*Salaam aleikum*,' he greeted the man.

'*Aleikum salaam, effendi*,' said the man, and slipping into heavily accented English added, 'Welcome to the tent of Abu Murra. Please, be seated.' He clapped hands and a slave girl brought us goblets of iced sherbet and plates of sweetmeats, and we fell to with a will. A fine Turkish coffee brought the refreshments to a satisfactory close, after which the sheik asked politely for our names.

'May I be so grossly discourteous as to express my curiosity at the presence of Englishmen and women so far into the interior?' Abu Murra went on. 'It is rare that we see people of your country in these parts, and even rare when they do not belong to the colonial police.'

The man's hospitality could not be faulted, but I felt uneasy at taking tiffin with a man involved in such a disgusting and degrading trade. At this mention of police, I gave him an angry glare.

Abu Murra laughed. 'Watson *effendi* does not approve of my livelihood,' he said. 'Alas, it is a dying trade, but I have a family to support in the distant Hejaz, and this trade was taught to me in my youth. I know no other life, though the Prophet urged gentleness towards slaves, even that they should be freed if they have any trade with which to support themselves.'

He sipped from his coffee cup, an exquisitely made piece of Turkish work with red and green arabesques. Certainly not the work of a barbarian. 'May I ask what brings Mr Sherlock Holmes, Miss Kate Marency, and Dr Watson into these lands? I would warn you that they are dangerous. Savage animals and more savage tribes roam these jungles, you know. Whatever it is you seek must be very important.' His eyes narrowed. 'Or is this one of these expeditions one hears of in the *suk*? Explorers like the far-famed Bula Matari¹?'

Holmes coughed. 'Perhaps you were closer when you made mention of the police,' he said. 'I am not a policeman,' he assured the sheik, 'but I have come to Africa in the pursuit of justice. Miss Marency's father was murdered in his home in England. We have come to this country seeking the man who killed him.'

'Murder. That is dreadful.' Abu Murra gave Miss Marency a look of profound sympathy. 'My condolences. But I am curious. What is it that makes you believe the murderer has sought refuge in this, let us be frank, benighted land?'

'My father,' said Miss Marency, 'travelled in this land when he was younger. He was abducted by a tribe from the mountains, my mother too. I grew up half wild without them.' I saw her fingers playing with the hilt of the machete she had hung from her belt. 'He discovered a lost city, a very rich place. He was murdered for a map that showed the route there. We believe the murderer has come this way in search of the city. Tell me, sir, have you heard news of any other white men passing this way?'

¹ Native name for the explorer Henry Morton Stanley.

Abu Murra's face paled beneath his dark tan. 'You speak of Balad 'Abu Al'Akadhib?' he stammered. 'I heard of it in my cradle. It is a foul place, if it even exists. Sensible men do not believe in such places, do not even think of them. Yes, they say it lies up in the Jebal al-Kong, the mountains to the east. Wicked blacks come down from those peaks to carry off men to sacrifice to their idols. But a beautiful woman like you would not want to go there.'

'I must,' she said steadily. 'I must find the man who killed my father. My companions are also here to find him.'

'There was word of a white man,' Abu Murra said softly, 'from the small people who live deep in the forest. But they are liars. I discounted it.' He frowned. 'Some said there was more than one man...' He shook his head as if to clear it. 'But I beseech you! You have eaten my bread and salt, shared my hospitality. Do not go into the mountains. You will find naught there but your death.'

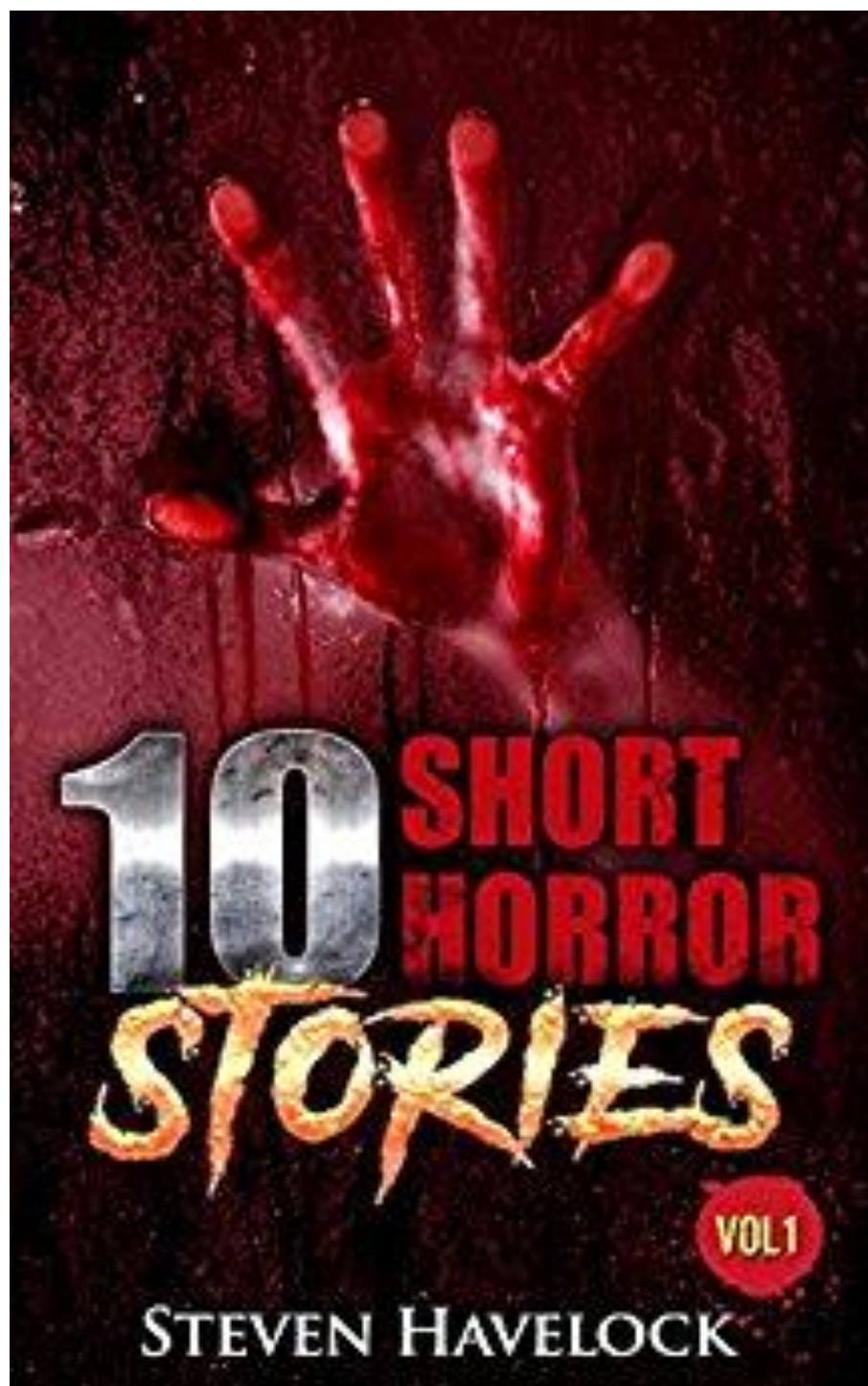
'We must go,' Holmes told him, 'as the lady says. Tell us what you know if this Balad 'Abu Al'Akadhib.'

The Arab shuddered. 'It is the devil's land,' he said, 'filled with unbelieving djinn. I have heard tell of the city, too. It is said men came from a far-off island in the sea, long, long ago, in the days of the Pre-Adamite Sultans. Allah was angered with them for their wickedness and he cast down their cities, drowned their island. Yet some of them lived on in Balad 'Abu Al'Akadhib.' He scowled. 'But over the ages,' he hissed, 'they have changed. It is said that they are no longer human.' He put a hand to his brow. 'I have told you enough. Do not seek out the lost city!'

'We must,' said Miss Marency.

Abu Murra looked up, and his eyes were bloodshot and red. 'Then go!' he said defiantly. 'Go, if you seek your deaths! But pollute not my humble tent with your cursed carcasses. Begone, infidels! Begone!'

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Ten

After consulting with Yamir in an unhurried discussion, Horst Dal turned a languid eye back upon Turhan Mot, who stood silently before him.

“And what would you say of it, Turhan Mot, should Horst Dal inform you that we, my brother, Yamir, and I have undertaken to rebuild the ship you abandoned, the “Grand Marquis”?”

Turhan Mot blanched, but he said nothing. Mokem Bet, much less disciplined than his master blurted out loud, “That’s our...” before Turhan Mot spun about and slapped his face.

“That is your... what?” Horst Dal asked with a smile. “Your... ship? The ship that you abandoned?”

Turhan Mot only stood before Horst Dal in silence.

“It... it was our ship,” Mokem Bet said, his head bowed

“Yes. Was. It was your ship. But once abandoned, as you abandoned it to your enemies, the ship becomes the property of whoever lays claim to it.”

Horst Dal leaned back in his chair and grinned.

“That is so,” Turhan Mot admitted.

“Our brother Yamir was at considerable trouble, to say nothing of the cost, in ferrying the ruins of the “Grand Marquis” to this harbourage.”

Turhan Mot bowed his head in acknowledgement.

“And your pilot, Tu Hit, no coward he, stayed with the “Grand Marquis” all throughout the battle at Callisto.”

“It is as you say, Horst Dal,” Turhan Mot admitted.

“And I am, myself, spending much to have the “Grand Marquis” rebuilt,” Horst Dal said.

Turhan Mot could do nothing but lower his head in acknowledgement of the indisputable truths uttered by Horst Dal.

“So the question stands before us, who among the three of us has the best claim on the “Grand Marquis?”

“I cannot answer that question, Horst Dal,” Turhan Mott replied. “It seems to me that you all

three have a most just claim upon it.”

“And not Turhan Mot?” Horst Dal grinned.

Turhan Mot felt the sting of Horst Dal’s words, as Horst Dal intended he should. But he was too wise to let the sting show on his face. He knew that his life, and Mokem Bet’s too, hung by the very thinnest of threads, that thread held in the grasp of Horst Dal himself.

“As Horst Dal himself has observed to us,” Turhan Mot answered, in words chosen with the greatest caution, “When once we abandoned the “Grand Marquis”, we relinquished all claim to it.”

“Quite so, quite so,” Horst Dal answered.

“And perhaps you and that man who follows you yet...” Horst Dal let his voice trail off into silence, as he stared at Mokem Bet, standing next to Turhan Mot.

“I beg to remind the great Horst Dal, this is my lieutenant, Mokem Bet.”

“Of course, of course,” Horst Dal replied.

“Perhaps you and your lieutenant would take some interest in seeing how the “Grand Marquis” is being rebuilt?”

Turhan Mot, though he was in no way a sentimental man, he was yet surprised to find himself cut through his cold heart by Horst Dal’s pronouncement. Once, it was Horst Dal’s decision, and his alone, what should be done with the “Grand Marquis”. He had lost much in his assault upon Callisto.

Now he was but a beggar, one without a ship, pleading for his life, and watching as his beloved ship was manhandled by others. This was a most subtle torture Horst Dal was inflicting upon the man.

Damn him. And damn that man called Carter Ward, he who brought ruin upon all of Turhan Mot’s plans.

Turhan Mot answered Horst Dal.

“It is with great delight that Turhan Mot and his lieutenant, Mokem Bet, accept the gracious invitation proffered by the great Horst Dal. We should both be most pleased to witness with our own eyes the reconstruction of the “Grand Marquis”.

Horst Dal smiled and without speaking a word he rose from his chair. At a gesture from him, Yamir rose also, and he followed at Horst Dal’s right as the man left his apartment. Turhan Mot, signalling Mokem Bet to accompany him, followed the two men.

The four men made their way through numerous hallways, half walking and half swimming through the nearly weightless environment of the asteroid. The hallways were of many shapes, some of them round, like long tubes making many turns. Others were rectangular in shape, with other hallways branching out in every possible direction.

Every hallway was elaborately decorated. Deep carvings were engraved into the walls, depicting many scenes of decadence. Orgies and satyrs and nudes cavorting with monstrous creatures dredged from ancient myths. Extravagant mosaics of gold and silver tiles, accented with rubies and turquoise and amethyst. Ornate electric lamps lit the tunnels, the light from them reflecting luminescent colours of the mosaics, dancing among the shadows that played in the corners of the passageways. Slaves stood at the intersections of the tunnels, holding bowls of candies and sweetmeats, breads and cheeses of every possible kind. As he passed them, Horst Dal occasionally plucked a morsel for himself, and Yamir did likewise.

Horst Dal led his three companions on a circuitous path, one which neither Turhan Mot nor Mokem Bet would be able to retrace, were it left to them to find their way back, alone. With every turn and every foot they travelled, Turhan Mot felt himself ever more deeply in Horst Dal's grip.

Horst Dal moved swiftly, stepping gingerly and swimming through the tunnels. His golden robes flowed and fluttered about his body. Yamir, wearing but a pale blue jacket and a pair of pantaloons strode manfully beside Horst Dal.

And Turhan Mot, in an embroidered vest, and the trousers of flesh flayed from several of his victims followed close behind, with Mokem Bet, similarly attired.

They came at last to a large window that overlooked a vast and cavernous bay. It was as much as three quarters of a mile in length, half a mile in height, and another half mile with breadth. Within it were hundreds of workers. They were all busy, crawling over the hulk of what Turhan Mot instantly recognized were the ruins of the "Grand Marquis". Scaffoldings, ladders and platforms crowded the interior of this vast work space.

Mounted upon a scaffolding were the two pieces of its fuselage lying side by side. The nearly half-mile long ship had been shortened, at Horst Dal's direction, to a quarter mile length. Atop those two pieces, a third was being put in place. This afforded the refurbished "Grand Marquis" not a single flight deck, but four, one each for the two parts of the fuselage at bottom, and two for the topmost piece.

Shortened as it was, the rebuilt ship provided more space within, permitting for a much larger crew, a larger complement of fighter craft, and much larger number of heavy weapons.

Horst Dal stood at the window, keeping himself in place by gripping hold of the hand rail at the base of the window. He said nothing for several minutes, satisfying himself with gloating silently over the very rapid progress being made on the rebuilding.

At last he turned to Turhan Mot and asked him, "What do you think, Turhan Mot? Is not the

progress our work crews have made most impressive?”

Turhan Mot looked long at what had once been his ship before he answered. When, at last he did, what he said was, “Horst Dal has proven himself once again to be a man of great vision.”

Horst Dal was most amused at the agony Turhan Mot was so plainly suffering. For him to see his own ship in the hands of another, one who remaking it to his own pleasure, even though Turhan Mot had so plainly abandoned her, yes, that must be a most excruciating pain for him, indeed. Horst Dal made no effort to hide the grin that spread across his face.

“Horst Dal has brought you here,” he said, speaking of himself in the third person, “To show you this, but also for another reason.”

“We await the word of the great Horst Dal,” Turhan Mot replied.

“It would give us great pleasure to remove your head from your shoulders, for the fiasco at Callisto, and the cowardice you so shamefully displayed there. You cost us much. More than you can hope to repay.”

Turhan Mot said nothing.

“Had your campaign against Callisto been a success, we should have made a great conquest. It would have been one which the Earth Space Forces would be hard put to it to challenge. We should have been lords of Jupiter and the outer asteroids.

“But, because you botched the attack so terribly, we are weakened. We lost many good fighters. We lost their ships and their guns. I lost much money, trusting in your capabilities.

“I have made that mistake once. I shall not repeat that mistake.

“But,” he continued, “Word has come to us that the attack on Callisto has incurred a powerful wrath among the Earthians. Most particularly, the man called Benson, Secretary of the Alliance of Western States is seeking vengeance against us. He has called upon his Earth Space Forces to seek us out, most particularly.

“However it has happened (Horst Dal cast an ugly glare at Turhan Mot), rumours of Astra Palace have come to the ear of this Secretary Benson, and he is on the cusp of sending an expedition to these parts, with the sole intent to destroy us. For that alone, I should slice off both your ears.”

Horst Dal paused in his diatribe to look plainly at Mokem Bet’s head. Mokem Bet had lost both his ears during the assault on IPS-3, one of them shot off with a furious blast from a laser pistol, and the other, bitten off by the child, Emily. Horst Dal smirked, then resumed speaking.

“So we are here. The existence of Astra Palace has been divulged. Soon, Earth Space Forces shall arrive here with the sole purpose to destroy us. As much as it would delight me to decorate my wall with your head—and make no mistake on that count, I would surely take great delight in

that—I must first think of what is needful for Astra Palace.

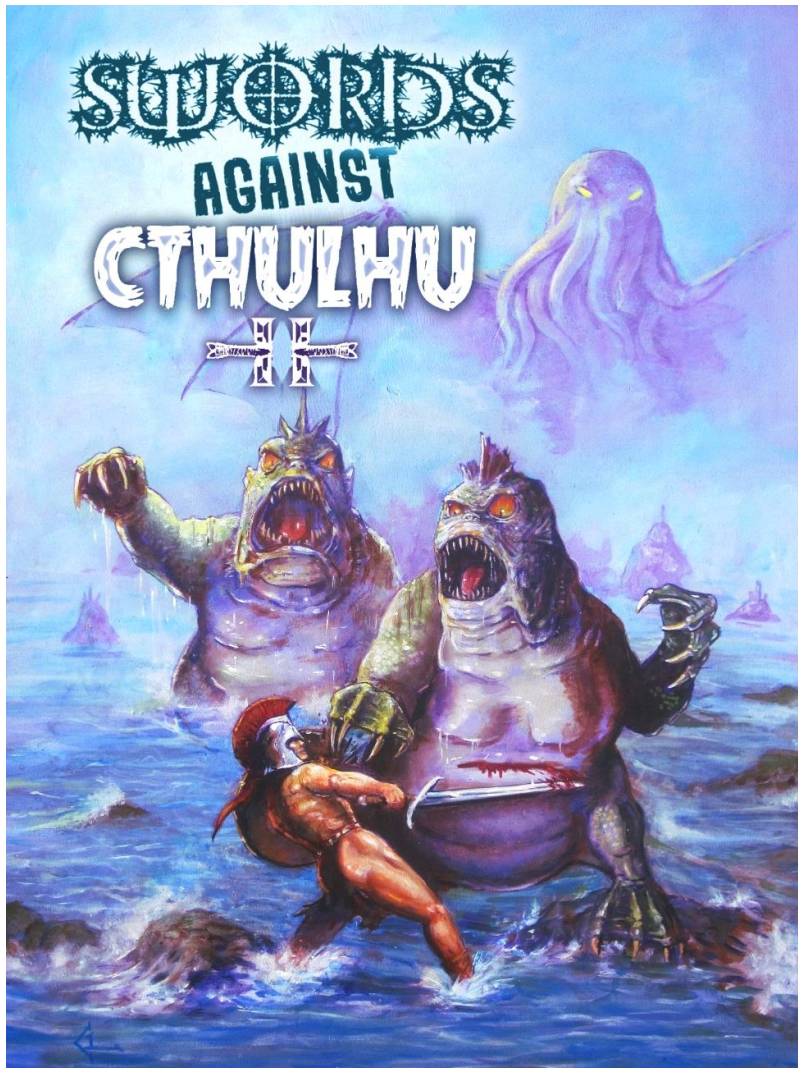
“We must protect Astra Palace. And we shall. And to do that, we must build a fleet, one to match the fleet that Earth Space Forces will soon send against us.

“In spite of your recent incompetence, you had previously demonstrated some elemental capabilities. And for this challenge approaching, we require every capable hand. For this, Turhan Mot, Horst Dal is staying your execution. We shall afford you this one last opportunity. Yamir, Tu Hit and Horst Dal claim the “Grand Marquis” as our own.

“You shall be its captain, when it is completed. For now, you are charged with capturing this Carter Ward and bringing him to us. Do you understand?”

“Turhan Mot understands, and he thanks Horst Dal with great gratitude for his boundless mercy.”

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ACROSS THE ZODIAC by Percy Greg

Chapter XVI—Troubled Waters.

We were now in Martial N. latitude 57°, in a comparatively open part of the narrow sea which encloses the northern land-belt, and to the south-eastward lay the only channel by which this sea communicates with the main ocean of the southern hemisphere. Along this we took our course. Rather against Ergimo's advice, I insisted on remaining on the surface, as the sea was tolerably calm. Eveena, with her usual self-suppression, professed to prefer the free air, the light of the long day, and such amusement as the sight of an occasional sea-monster or shoal of fishes afforded, to the fainter light and comparative monotony of submarine travelling. Ergimo, who had in his time commanded the hunters of the Arctic Sea, was almost as completely exempt as myself from sea-sickness; but I was surprised to find that the crew disliked, and, had they ventured, would have grumbled at, the change, being so little accustomed to any long superficial voyage as to suffer like landsmen from rough weather. The difference between sailing on and below the surface is so great, both in comfort and in the kind of skill and knowledge required, that the seamen of passenger and of mercantile vessels are classes much more distinct than those of the mercantile and national marine of England, or any other maritime Power on Earth. I consented readily that, except on the rare occasions when the heavens were visible, the short night, from the fall of the evening to the dissipation of the morning mists, should be passed under water. I have said that gales are comparatively rare and the tides insignificant; but the narrow and exceedingly long channels of the Martial seas, with the influence of a Solar movement from north to south more extensive though slower than that which takes place between our Winter and Summer Solstices, produce currents, atmospheric and oceanic, and sudden squalls that often give rise to that worst of all disturbances of the surface, known as a "chopping sea." When we crossed the tropic and came fairly into the channel separating the western coast of the continent on which the Astronaut had landed from the eastern seaboard of that upon whose southern coast I was presently to disembark, this disturbance was even worse than, except on peculiarly disagreeable occasions, in the Straits of Dover. After enduring this for two or three hours, I observed that Eveena had stolen from her seat beside me on the deck. Since we left Askinta her spirits had been unusually variable. She had been sometimes lively and almost excitable; more generally quiet, depressed, and silent even beyond her wont. Still, her manner and bearing were always so equable, gentle, and docile that, accustomed to the caprices of the sex on Earth, I had hardly noticed the change. I thought, however, that she was to-day nervous and somewhat pale; and as she did not return, after permitting the pilot to seek a calmer stratum at some five fathoms depth, I followed Eveena into our cabin or chamber. Standing with her back to the entrance and with a goblet to her lips, she did not hear me till I had approached within arm's length. She then started violently, so agitated that the colour faded at once from her countenance, leaving it white as in a swoon, then as suddenly returning, flushed her neck and face, from the emerald shoulder clasps to the silver snood, with a pink deeper than that of her robe.

"I am very sorry I startled you," I said. "You are certainly ill, or you would not be so easily upset."

I laid my hand as I spoke on her soft tresses, but she withdrew from the touch, sinking down among the cushions. Leaving her to recover her composure, I took up the half-empty cup she had

dropped on the central table. Thirsty myself, I had almost drained without tasting it, when a little half-stifled cry of dismay checked me. The moment I removed the cup from my mouth I perceived its flavour—the unmistakable taste of the dravadoné (“courage cup”), so disagreeable to us both, which we had shared on our bridal evening. Wetting with one drop the test-stone attached to my watch-chain, it presented the local discoloration indicating the narcotic poison which is the chief ingredient of this compound.

“I don’t think this is wise, child,” I said, turning once more to Eveena. To my amazement, far from having recovered the effect of her surprise, she was yet more overcome than at first; crouching among the cushions with her head bent down over her knees, and covering her face with her hands. Reclining in the soft pile, I held her in my arms, overcoming perforce what seemed hysterical reluctance; but when I would have withdrawn the little hands, she threw herself on my knee, burying her face in the cushions.

“It is very wicked,” she sobbed; “I cannot ask you to forgive me.”

“Forgive what, my child? Eveena, you are certainly ill. Calm yourself, and don’t try to talk just now.”

“I am not ill, I assure you,” she faltered, resisting the arm that sought to raise her; “but ...”

In my hands, however, she was powerless as an infant; and I would hear nothing till I held her gathered within my arm and her two hands fast in my right. Now that I could look into the face she strove to avert, it was clear that she was neither hysterical nor simply ill; her agitation, however unreasonable and extravagant, was real.

“What troubles you, my own? I promise you not to say one word of reproach; I only want to understand with what you so bitterly reproach yourself.”

“But you cannot help being angry,” she urged, “if you understand what I have done. It is the charny, which I never tasted till that night, and never ought to have tasted again. I know you cannot forgive me; only take my fault for granted, and don’t question me.”

These incoherent words threw the first glimpse of light on the meaning of her distress and penitence. I doubt if the best woman in Christendom would so reproach and abase herself, if convicted of even a worse sin than the secret use of those stimulants for which the charny is a Martial equivalent. No Martialist would dream of poisoning his blood and besotting his brain with alcohol in any form. But their opiates affect a race addicted to physical repose, to sensuous enjoyment rather than to sensual excitement, and to lucid intellectual contemplation, with a sense of serene delight as supremely delicious to their temperament as the dreamy illusions of haschisch to the Turk, the fierce frenzy of bhang to the Malay, or the wild excitement of brandy or Geneva to the races of Northern Europe. But as with the luxury of intoxication in Europe, so in Mars indulgence in these drugs, freely permitted to the one sex, is strictly forbidden by opinion and domestic rule to the other. A lady discovered in the use of charny is as deeply disgraced as an European matron detected in the secret enjoyment of spirits and cigars; and her lord and master takes care to render her sufficiently conscious of her fault.

And there was something stranger here than a violation of the artificial restraint of sex. Slightly and seldom as the Golden Circle touches the lines defining personal or social morality—carefully as the Founder has abstained from imposing an ethical code of his own, or attaching to his precepts any rule not directly derived from the fundamental tenets or necessary to the cohesion of the Order—he had expressed in strong terms his dread and horror of narcotism; the use for pleasure’s sake, not to relieve pain or nervous excitement, of drugs which act, as he said, through the brain upon the soul. His judgment, expressed with unusual directness and severity and enforced by experience, has become with his followers a tradition not less imperative than the most binding of their laws. It was so held, above all, in that household in which Eveena and I had first learnt the “lore of the Starlight.” Esmo, indeed, regarded not merely as an unscientific superstition, but as blasphemous folly, the rejection of any means of restoring health or relieving pain which Providence has placed within human reach. But he abhorred the use for pleasure’s sake of poisons affirmed to reduce the activity and in the long-run to impair the energies of the mind, and weaken the moral sense and the will, more intensely than the strictest follower of the Arabian Prophet abhors the draughts which deprive man of the full use of the senses, intelligence, and conscience which Allah has bestowed, and degrade him below the brute, Esmo’s children, moreover, were not more strictly compelled to respect the letter than carefully instructed in the principle of every command for which he claimed their obedience.

But in such measure as Eveena’s distress became intelligible, the fault of which she accused herself became incredible. I could not believe that she could be wilfully disloyal to me—still less that she could have suddenly broken through the fixed ideas of her whole life, the principles engraved on her mind by education more stringently than the maxims of the Koran or the Levitical Law on the children of Ishmael or of Israel; and this while the impressive rites of Initiation, the imprecation at which I myself had shuddered, were fresh in her memory—their impression infinitely deepened, moreover, by the awful mystery of that Vision of which even yet we were half afraid to speak to one another. While I hesitated to reply, gathering up as well as I could the thread of these thoughts as they passed in a few seconds through my mind, my left hand touched an object hidden in my bride’s zone. I drew out a tiny crystal phial three parts full, taken, as I saw, from the medicine-chest Esmo had carefully stocked and as carefully fastened. As, holding this, I turned again to her, Eveena repeated: “Punish, but don’t question me!”

“My own,” I said, “you are far more punished already than you deserve or I can bear to see. How did you get this?”

Releasing her hands, she drew from the folds of her robe the electric keys, which, by a separate combination, would unlock each of my cases; —without which it was impossible to open or force them.

“Yes, I remember; and you were surprised that I trusted them to you. And now you expect me to believe that you have abused that trust, deceived me, broken a rule which in your father’s house and by all our Order is held sacred as the rings of the Signet, for a drug which twelve days ago you disliked as much as I?”

“It is true.”

The words were spoken with downcast eyes, in the low faltering tone natural to a confession of disgrace.

“It is not true, Eveena; or if true in form, false in matter. If it were possible that you could wish to deceive me, you knew it could not be for long.”

“I meant to be found out,” she interrupted, “only not yet.”

She had betrayed herself, stung by words that seemed to express the one doubt she could not nerve herself to endure—doubt of her loyalty to me. Before I could speak, she looked up hastily, and began to retract. I stopped her.

“I see—when you had done with it. But, Eveena, why conceal it? Do you think I would not have given this or all the contents of the chest into your hands, and asked no question?”

“Do you mean it? Could you have so trusted me?”

“My child! is it difficult to trust where I know there is no temptation to wrong? Do you think that to-day I have doubted or suspected you, even while you have accused yourself? I cannot guess at your motive, but I am as sure as ever of your loyalty. Take these things,”—forcing back upon her the phial and the magnets, — “yes, and the test-stone.” ... She burst into passionate tears.

“I cannot endure this. If I had dreamed your patience would have borne with me half so far, I would never have tried it so, even for your own sake. I meant to be found out and accept the consequences in silence. But you trust me so, that I must tell you what I wanted to conceal. When you kept on the surface it made me so ill”—

“But, Eveena, if the remedy be not worse than the sickness, why not ask for it openly?”

“It was not that. Don’t you understand? Of course, I would bear any suffering rather than have done this; but then you would have found me out at once. I wanted to conceal my suffering, not to escape it.”

“My child! my child! how could you put us both to all this pain?”

“You know you would not have given me the draught; you would have left the surface at once; and I cannot bear to be always in the way, always hindering your pleasures, and even your discoveries. You came across a distance that makes a bigger world than this look less than that light, through solitude and dangers and horrors I cannot bear to think of, to see and examine this world of ours. And then you leave things unseen or half-seen, you spoil your work, because a girl is seasick! You ran great risk of death and got badly hurt to see what our hunting was like, and you will not let my head ache that you may find out what our sea-storms and currents are! How can I bear to be such a burden upon you? You trust me, and, I believe,” (she added, colouring), “you love me, twelvefold more than I deserve; yet you think me unwilling or unworthy to take ever so small an interest in your work, to bear a few hours’ discomfort for it and for you. And

yet," she went on passionately, "I may sit trembling and heart-sick for a whole day alone that you may carry out your purpose. I may receive the only real sting your lips have given, because I could not bear that pain without crying. And so with everything. It is not that I must not suffer pain, but that the pain must not come from without. Your lips would punish a fault with words that shame and sting for a day, a summer, a year; your hand must never inflict a sting that may smart for ten minutes. And it is not only that you do this, but you pride yourself on it. Why? It is not that you think the pain of the body so much worse than that of the spirit: —you that smiled at me when you were too badly bruised and torn to stand, yet could scarcely keep back your tears just now, when you thought that I had suffered half an hour of sorrow I did not quite deserve. Why then? Do you think that women feel so differently? Have the women of your Earth hearts so much harder and skins so much softer than ours?"

She spoke with most unusual impetuosity, and with that absolute simplicity and sincerity which marked her every look and word, which gave them, for me at least, an unspeakable charm, and for all who heard her a characteristic individuality unlike the speech or manner of any other woman. As soon suspect an infant of elaborate sarcasm as Eveena of affectation, irony, or conscious paradox. Nay, while her voice was in my ears, I never could feel that her views were paradoxical. The direct straightforwardness and simple structure of the Martial language enhanced this peculiar effect of her speech; and much that seems infantine in translation was all but eloquent as she spoke it. Often, as on this occasion, I felt guilty of insincerity, of a verbal fencing unworthy of her unalloyed good faith and earnestness, as I endeavoured to parry thrusts that went to the very heart of all those instinctive doctrines which I could the less defend on the moment, because I had never before dreamed that they could be doubted.

"At any rate," I said at last, "your sex gain by my heresy, since they are as richly gifted in stinging words as we in physical force."

"So much the worse for them, surely," she answered simply, "if it be right that men should rule and women obey?"

"That is the received doctrine on Earth," I answered. "In practice, men command and women disobey them; men bully and women lie. But in truth, Eveena, having a wife only too loyal and too loving, I don't care to canvass the deserts of ordinary women or the discipline of other households. I own that it was wrong to scold you. Do not insist on making me say that it would have been a little less wrong to beat you!"

She laughed—her low, sweet, silvery laugh, the like of which I have hardly heard among Earthly women, even of the simpler, more child-like races of the East and South; a laugh still stranger in a world where childhood is seldom bright and womanhood mostly sad and fretful. Of the very few satisfactory memories I bore away from that world, the sweetest is the recollection of that laugh, which I heard for the first time on the morrow of our bridals, and for the last time on the day before we parted. I cherish it as evidence that, despite many and bitter troubles, my bride's short married life was not wholly unhappy. By this time she had found out that we had left the surface, and began to remonstrate.

"Nay, I have seen all I care to see, my own. I confess the justice of your claim, as the partner of

my life, to be the partner of its paramount purpose. You are more precious to me than all the discoveries of which I ever dreamed, and I will not for any purpose whatsoever expose you to real peril or serious pain. But henceforth I will ask you to bear discomfort and inconvenience when the object is worth it, and to help me wherever your help can avail."

"I can help you?"

"Much, and in many ways, my Eveena. You will soon learn to understand what I wish to examine and the use of the instruments I employ; and then you will be the most useful of assistants, as you are the best and most welcome of companions."

As I spoke a soft colour suffused her face, and her eyes brightened with a joy and contentment such as no promise of pleasure or indulgence could have inspired. To be the partner of adventure and hardship, the drudge in toil and sentinel in peril, was the boon she claimed, the best guerdon I could promise. If but the promise might have been better fulfilled!

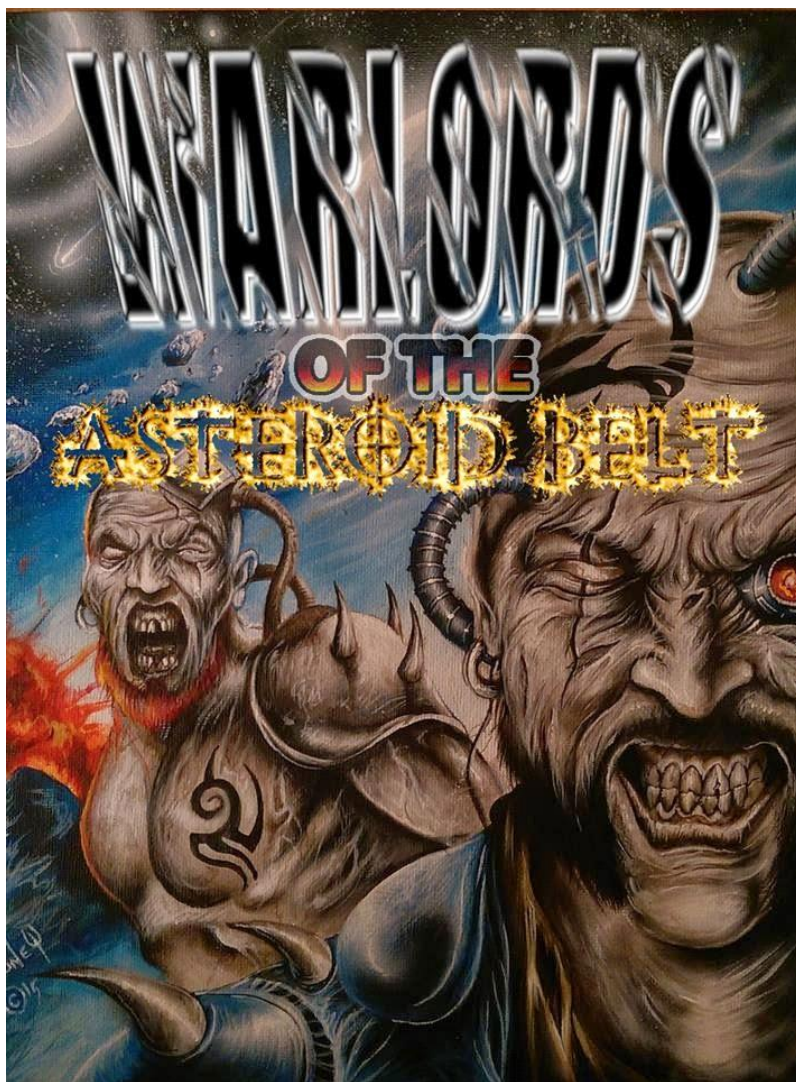
It was not till in latitude 9° S. we emerged into the open ocean, and presently found ourselves free from the currents of the narrow waters, that, in order to see the remarkable island of which I had caught sight in my descent, I requested Ergimo to remain for some hours above the surface. The island rises directly out of the sea, and is absolutely unascendable. Balloons, however, render access possible, both to its summit and to its cave-pierced sides. It is the home of enormous flocks of white birds, which resemble in form the heron rather than the eider duck, but which, like the latter, line with down drawn from their own breasts the nests which, counted by millions, occupy every nook and cranny of the crystalline walls, about ten miles in circumference. Each of the nests is nearly as large as that of the stork. They are made of a jelly digested from the bones of the fish upon which the birds prey, and are almost as white in colour as the birds themselves. Freshly formed nest dissolved in hot water makes dishes as much to the taste of Martialists as the famous bird-nest soup to that of the Chinese. Both down and nests, therefore, are largely plundered; but the birds are never injured, and care is taken in robbing them to leave enough of the outer portion of the nest to constitute a bed for the eggs, and encourage the creatures to rebuild and reline it.

One harvest only is permitted, the second stripping of feathers and the rebuilt nest being left undisturbed. The caverns are lined with a white guano, now some feet thick, since it has ceased to be sought for manure; the Martialists having discovered means of saturating the soil with ammonia procured from the nitrogen of the atmosphere, which with the sewage and other similar materials enables them to dispense with this valuable bird manure. Whether the white colour of the island, perceptible even in a large Terrestrial telescope, is in any degree due to the whiteness of the birds, their nests, and leavings, or wholly to reflection from the bright spar-like surface of the rock itself, and especially of the flat table-like summit, I will not pretend to say.

From this point we held our course south-westward, and entered the northernmost of two extraordinary gulfs of exactly similar shape, separated by an isthmus and peninsula which assume on a map the form of a gigantic hammer. The strait by which each gulf is entered is about a hundred miles in length and ten in breadth. The gulf itself, if it should not rather be called an inland sea, occupies a total area of about 100,000 square miles. The isthmus, 500 miles in length

by 50 in breadth, ends in a roughly square peninsula of about 10,000 square miles in extent, nearly the whole of which is a plateau 2000 feet above the sea-level. On the narrowest point of the isthmus, just where it joins the mainland, and where a sheltered bay runs up from either sea, is situated the great city of Amâkasfe, the natural centre of Martial life and commerce. At this point we found awaiting us the balloon which was to convey us to the Court of the Suzerain. A very light but strong metallic framework maintained the form of the "fish-shaped" or spindle-shaped balloon itself, which closely resembled that of our vessel, its dimensions being of necessity greater. Attached to this framework was the car of similar form, about twelve feet in length and six in depth, the upper third of the sides, however, being of open-work, so as not to interfere with the survey of the traveller. Eveena could not help shivering at the sight of the slight vehicle and the enormous machine of thin, bladder-like material by which it was to be upheld. She embarked, indeed, without a word, her alarm betraying itself by no voluntary sign, unless it were the tight clasp of my hand, resembling that of a child frightened, but ashamed to confess its fear. I noticed, however, that she so arranged her veil as to cover her eyes when the signal for the start was given. She was, therefore, wholly unconscious of the sudden spring, unattended by the slightest jolt or shake, which raised us at once 500 feet above the coast, and under whose influence, to my eyes, the ground appeared suddenly to fall from us. When I drew out the folds of her veil, it was with no little amazement that she saw the sky around her, the sea and the city far below. An aerial current to the north-westward at our present level, which had been selected on that account, carried us at a rate of some twelve miles an hour; a rate much increased, however, by the sails at the stern of the car, sails of thin metal fixed on strong frames, and striking with a screw-like motion. Their lack of expanse was compensated by a rapidity of motion such that they seemed to the eye not to move at all, presenting the appearance of an uniform disc reflecting the rays of the Sun, which was now almost immediately above us. Towards evening the Residence of the Campâtâ became visible on the north-western horizon. It was built on a plateau about 400 feet above the sea-level, towards which the ground from all sides sloped up almost imperceptibly. Around it was a garden of great extent with a number of trees of every sort, some of them masses of the darkest green, others of bright yellow, contrasting similarly shaped masses of almost equal size clothed from base to top in a continuous sheet of pink, emerald, white or crimson flowers. The turf presented almost as great a variety of colours, arranged in every conceivable pattern, above which rose innumerable flower-beds, uniform or varied, the smallest perhaps two, the largest more than 200 feet in diameter; each circle of bloom higher than that outside it, till in some cases the centre rose even ten feet above the general level. The building itself was low, having nowhere more than two stories. One wing, pointed out to me by Ergimo, was appropriated to the household of the Prince; the centre standing out in front and rear, divided by a court almost as wide as the wings; the further wing accommodating the attendants and officials of the Court. We landed, just before the evening mist began to gather, at the foot of an inclined way of a concrete resembling jasper, leading up to the main entrance of the Palace.

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THE WAR OF THE WORLDS by HG Wells

Book Two: The Earth Under the Martians

Chapter Four: The Death of the Curate

It was on the sixth day of our imprisonment that I peeped for the last time, and presently found myself alone. Instead of keeping close to me and trying to oust me from the slit, the curate had gone back into the scullery. I was struck by a sudden thought. I went back quickly and quietly into the scullery. In the darkness I heard the curate drinking. I snatched in the darkness, and my fingers caught a bottle of burgundy.

For a few minutes there was a tussle. The bottle struck the floor and broke, and I desisted and rose. We stood panting and threatening each other. In the end I planted myself between him and the food, and told him of my determination to begin a discipline. I divided the food in the pantry, into rations to last us ten days. I would not let him eat any more that day. In the afternoon he made a feeble effort to get at the food. I had been dozing, but in an instant I was awake. All day and all night we sat face to face, I weary but resolute, and he weeping and complaining of his immediate hunger. It was, I know, a night and a day, but to me it seemed—it seems now—an interminable length of time.

And so our widened incompatibility ended at last in open conflict. For two vast days we struggled in undertones and wrestling contests. There were times when I beat and kicked him madly, times when I cajoled and persuaded him, and once I tried to bribe him with the last bottle of burgundy, for there was a rain-water pump from which I could get water. But neither force nor kindness availed; he was indeed beyond reason. He would neither desist from his attacks on the food nor from his noisy babbling to himself. The rudimentary precautions to keep our imprisonment endurable he would not observe. Slowly I began to realise the complete overthrow of his intelligence, to perceive that my sole companion in this close and sickly darkness was a man insane.

From certain vague memories I am inclined to think my own mind wandered at times. I had strange and hideous dreams whenever I slept. It sounds paradoxical, but I am inclined to think that the weakness and insanity of the curate warned me, braced me, and kept me a sane man.

On the eighth day he began to talk aloud instead of whispering, and nothing I could do would moderate his speech.

“It is just, O God!” he would say, over and over again. “It is just. On me and mine be the punishment laid. We have sinned, we have fallen short. There was poverty, sorrow; the poor were trodden in the dust, and I held my peace. I preached acceptable folly—my God, what folly!—when I should have stood up, though I died for it, and called upon them to repent—repent!... Oppressors of the poor and needy...! The wine press of God!”

Then he would suddenly revert to the matter of the food I withheld from him, praying, begging, weeping, at last threatening. He began to raise his voice—I prayed him not to. He perceived a

hold on me—he threatened he would shout and bring the Martians upon us. For a time that scared me; but any concession would have shortened our chance of escape beyond estimating. I defied him, although I felt no assurance that he might not do this thing. But that day, at any rate, he did not. He talked with his voice rising slowly, through the greater part of the eighth and ninth days—threats, entreaties, mingled with a torrent of half-sane and always frothy repentance for his vacant sham of God’s service, such as made me pity him. Then he slept awhile, and began again with renewed strength, so loudly that I must needs make him desist.

“Be still!” I implored.

He rose to his knees, for he had been sitting in the darkness near the copper.

“I have been still too long,” he said, in a tone that must have reached the pit, “and now I must bear my witness. Woe unto this unfaithful city! Woe! Woe! Woe! Woe! Woe! To the inhabitants of the earth by reason of the other voices of the trumpet—”

“Shut up!” I said, rising to my feet, and in a terror lest the Martians should hear us. “For God’s sake—”

“Nay,” shouted the curate, at the top of his voice, standing likewise and extending his arms. “Speak! The word of the Lord is upon me!”

In three strides he was at the door leading into the kitchen.

“I must bear my witness! I go! It has already been too long delayed.”

I put out my hand and felt the meat chopper hanging to the wall. In a flash I was after him. I was fierce with fear. Before he was halfway across the kitchen I had overtaken him. With one last touch of humanity I turned the blade back and struck him with the butt. He went headlong forward and lay stretched on the ground. I stumbled over him and stood panting. He lay still.

Suddenly I heard a noise without, the run and smash of slipping plaster, and the triangular aperture in the wall was darkened. I looked up and saw the lower surface of a handling-machine coming slowly across the hole. One of its gripping limbs curled amid the debris; another limb appeared, feeling its way over the fallen beams. I stood petrified, staring. Then I saw through a sort of glass plate near the edge of the body the face, as we may call it, and the large dark eyes of a Martian, peering, and then a long metallic snake of tentacle came feeling slowly through the hole.

I turned by an effort, stumbled over the curate, and stopped at the scullery door. The tentacle was now some way, two yards or more, in the room, and twisting and turning, with queer sudden movements, this way and that. For a while I stood fascinated by that slow, fitful advance. Then, with a faint, hoarse cry, I forced myself across the scullery. I trembled violently; I could scarcely stand upright. I opened the door of the coal cellar, and stood there in the darkness staring at the faintly lit doorway into the kitchen, and listening. Had the Martian seen me? What was it doing now?

Something was moving to and fro there, very quietly; every now and then it tapped against the wall, or started on its movements with a faint metallic ringing, like the movements of keys on a split-ring. Then a heavy body—I knew too well what—was dragged across the floor of the kitchen towards the opening. Irresistibly attracted, I crept to the door and peeped into the kitchen. In the triangle of bright outer sunlight I saw the Martian, in its Briareus of a handling-machine, scrutinizing the curate's head. I thought at once that it would infer my presence from the mark of the blow I had given him.

I crept back to the coal cellar, shut the door, and began to cover myself up as much as I could, and as noiselessly as possible in the darkness, among the firewood and coal therein. Every now and then I paused, rigid, to hear if the Martian had thrust its tentacles through the opening again.

Then the faint metallic jingle returned. I traced it slowly feeling over the kitchen. Presently I heard it nearer—in the scullery, as I judged. I thought that its length might be insufficient to reach me. I prayed copiously. It passed, scraping faintly across the cellar door. An age of almost intolerable suspense intervened; then I heard it fumbling at the latch! It had found the door! The Martians understood doors!

It worried at the catch for a minute, perhaps, and then the door opened.

In the darkness I could just see the thing—like an elephant's trunk more than anything else—waving towards me and touching and examining the wall, coals, wood and ceiling. It was like a black worm swaying its blind head to and fro.

Once, even, it touched the heel of my boot. I was on the verge of screaming; I bit my hand. For a time the tentacle was silent. I could have fancied it had been withdrawn. Presently, with an abrupt click, it gripped something—I thought it had me!—and seemed to go out of the cellar again. For a minute I was not sure. Apparently it had taken a lump of coal to examine.

I seized the opportunity of slightly shifting my position, which had become cramped, and then listened. I whispered passionate prayers for safety.

Then I heard the slow, deliberate sound creeping towards me again. Slowly, slowly it drew near, scratching against the walls and tapping the furniture.

While I was still doubtful, it rapped smartly against the cellar door and closed it. I heard it go into the pantry, and the biscuit-tins rattled and a bottle smashed, and then came a heavy bump against the cellar door. Then silence that passed into an infinity of suspense.

Had it gone?

At last I decided that it had.

It came into the scullery no more; but I lay all the tenth day in the close darkness, buried among coals and firewood, not daring even to crawl out for the drink for which I craved. It was the

eleventh day before I ventured so far from my security.

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