

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 12, ISSUE 26
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DEATH IS A MIDNIGHT STALLION

**BY BENJAMIN
BLAKE—
THE OLD
BASTARD
WOULDN'T GET
HIM...**

CRIME AND COVER-UP

**BY GERALD E
SHEAGREN—
TIME TO PAY
THE PIPER...**

PULP POLLUTION BY STEVE LAKER

THE VERTICAL CITY

**BY GAVIN
CHAPPELL**

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Gerald E Sheagren, Steve Laker, Gregory KH Bryant, Percy Greg, HG Wells*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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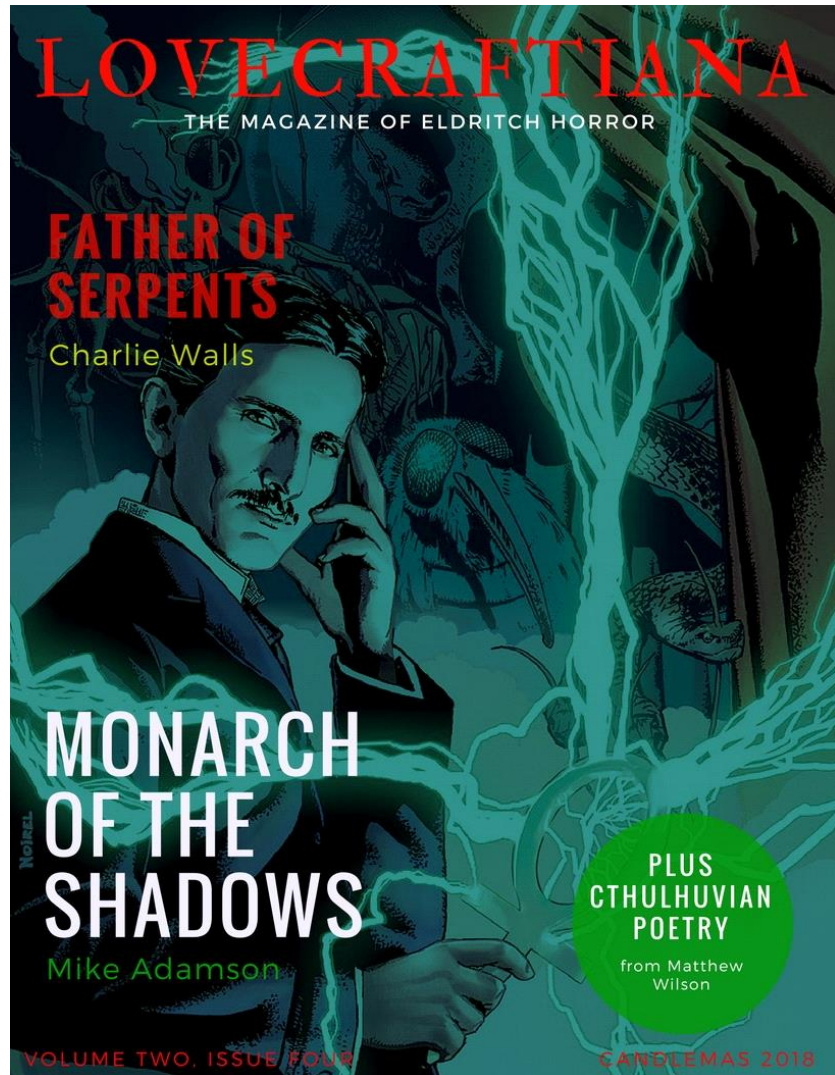
EDITORIAL

This week, an old man hears the thunder of hoofs. A detective witnesses the execution of a criminal. A writer visits a restaurant with a difference. And four adventurers bring a warning of peril to a city in the mountains.

A parlour maid shows an inquisitive nature. Back on Callisto, Story Talbot fears for Lacey's safety. On Mars, we learn of Martial women and wedlock. And back on Earth, we discover what had happened in Surrey.

—Gavin Chappell

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



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DEATH IS A MIDNIGHT STALLION by Benjamin Blake

It was a little after midnight.

Nicholas Strasburg held a slightly-trembling match to his briarwood pipe. He puffed until it was sufficiently lit, shook the matchstick out, and dropped it into the Torquay ashtray upon his heavy oak desk. He scratched his thick white beard with his right hand, and sighed, deep and exhausted.

He was in his upstairs study, a reasonable-size room for what it was, and rather cluttered. Crammed bookshelves lined nearly every inch of wall, breaking only to spare room for mounted animal heads, creatures hunted many years before when Nicholas was a young man in Africa. At times, he found himself missing the warmth of the veldt, more so than ever as he crept further into old age. The New England winters seemed to grow colder every year. Or that was the explanation he half-heartedly told himself. In fact, he was dying. And on a deeper level, he knew that. Accepting it was another matter entirely. After all he had seen and done, commanded and conquered, he always thought that when the time did come, he would laugh in death's face and turn away, go back to whatever it was that he was doing at that particular moment. But now, he found himself unpleasantly surprised, even mortified—pardon the pun. Of course, this was all theoretical, Death, the old bastard, wouldn't get him, oh no! Not the great Nicholas Strasburg!

He scratched his thick beard once more, and continued to write by the light of the banker's lamp, pausing occasionally to take a sip from his whiskey glass. Only the finest Scotch for Nicholas Strasburg! This particular blend, a 20-year-old single malt from the Highlands. Of course, he wouldn't shake his head at a 20-year-old of another variety... He had bedded many women in his time. Caressed maiden-flesh in every continent. He was proud of that. He could show these modern-age Casanovas a thing or two. Maybe he wasn't terribly pleasing on the eye these days, but how many men could say that they had done the Himalayan Mountain Hop with a Kashmiri virgin? Several, in fact. Simultaneously. He smiled in remembrance, and took another sip of whiskey. He puffed on his pipe, and immediately was thrown into a fit of coughing. He retrieved a silk handkerchief from the inner pocket of his dark red robe, and covered his mouth until the wet hacking subsided. When he lowered his hand, there was a blood spot the size of a silver dollar. He refolded the handkerchief, and placed it back inside his robe pocket. He continued to write.

Sometime later, the telephone rang. He reached across the desk and lifted the cradle.

"Hello, Nicholas Strasburg speaking. Whom may I ask is calling at this ungodly hour?"

The person on the other end didn't reply. Though, ever-so-faint, so faint that at first, he didn't realize he was hearing it, there were voices on the other end. It sounded like an old radio play.

"Hello?! Is anybody there! This is Nicholas Strasburg speaking!"

The background sounds seemed to grow louder. Now he could make out distinct voices and even a stray name or place. Mary Kipperling. Wales. Didn't he once know a certain young lady by that name? His brow furrowed, and he reached for his whiskey glass. The stones rattled as he picked

it up.

‘Who is this? I am beginning to lose patience.’

Somewhere, sometime, a woman laughed, short and merry staccato bursts.

Nicholas Strasburg slammed the receiver down.

This was very strange. Very strange indeed. He wasn’t one to believe in hoodoo charms and the evil eye. Such superstition was the by-product of native ignorance. The need of less-civilized people and races to explain what they could not with science, because they did not know that such a thing even existed. Though, something about the telephone call had left him on edge. He poured another scotch, and sighed.

“And somewhere Darwin turns in his grave.”

The clock struck 3 a.m.

It’s tolling a lonely sound in the thick of night.

Nicholas Strasburg reached blindly through the pall of pipe-smoke to where he thought his whiskey glass sat. He was rather intoxicated.

“In certain folklore 3 a.m.—ante meridian, is known as the witching hour.” He laughed to himself, rocking back in his chair. His laughter was cut short by a sound outside. He cocked his head, squinted. “That sounds like...”

The sound grew louder.

“Yes! It is! I’m certain! The thundering of hooves!”

He came near to falling out of his chair when he went to rise.

The sound grew closer. It seemed like it was right outside of his house now.

He stumbled over to his curtained window, and wrenched the drapes open.

The whiskey glass fell from his hand. It broke on impact. The stones rattled and rolled across the hardwood floor and settled on the Egyptian rug.

A black stallion stood in his front yard. It stood afore the old crumbling birdbath, in the shadow of a moon which glowed behind the branches of a gnarled elm. It was an extremely large horse, its muscles rippled beneath its skin as it walked out from beneath the tree. Its eyes were burning coals.

The breath caught in Nicholas Strasburg's throat. A wind swept into the yard from a previously still night. Dead leaves swirled around the creature's hooves as it neared.

He gripped onto the curtain to try and keep his balance.

His eyes widened as no breath came.

The creature's eyes burned brighter.

Choked strangulated sounds came from his mouth. Blood flecked the window pane.

The midnight stallion reared up on hind legs, throwing its head to the sky and neighing.

Nicholas Strasburg clutched the curtain tighter, his fingernails digging right in to the fabric. His eyes bulged further out, his face swiftly turning the purple of an overripe plum. His lung burned as if the creature's eyes were inside of them. Blood dribbled from his chin, and his legs gave out. He collapsed to the floor, with hand still clutching the curtain.

Slowly, his hand unfurled itself. Nicholas Strasburg slumped on the hardwood floor in a pile.

The sound of hooves faded into the distance.

The telephone upon the desk began to ring.

THE END

[Available from Rogue Planet Press](#)

WINTER 2017-18

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CRIME AND COVER-UP by Gerald E Sheagren

Frank McGrath approached the prison, noting the peaceful crowd of perhaps two-hundred people, many holding candles while others were brandishing signs reading such things as *Stop Lethal Injections* and *God is Against Capital Punishment*.

When he drew to a stop in front of the gate, a uniformed guard leaned over and looked in his window. "State your business, sir."

McGrath displayed his badge and creds. "I'm Detective Frank McGrath. I'm here to witness the execution of Otis Weaver."

The guard checked a list of names. "Okay, sir. Do you know where to go?"

"Yup. I've been here for an execution before."

The guard chuckled. "Can't get enough of them, huh?"

McGrath couldn't help a chuckle of his own. "What can I tell you? I'm like a little kid at the circus."

"The only thing is we're not supplying popcorn and peanuts. Oh, and by the way. If you're carrying your piece, leave it in your car."

"Will do."

The guard flashed an O.K. gesture at a camera monitor and the electronically-operated gate slid open. Frank drove through then headed for a small parking lot at the rear of the prison. When he pulled into a space he leaned his head against the steering wheel and released a long, wounded groan. Despite his humour with the guard, this execution was going to be one hellish, bitter-sweet experience.

Five years ago, he'd arrested Otis Weaver for the murder of a college girl by the name of Tabitha Hastings. He'd violated her then strangled her to death, dumping her body in a swampy area some five miles from the city. The only thing is—he knew damn well that Weaver didn't do it.

Wracked by guilt, his own brother, Dennis, had come to him and confessed to the murder. He'd beaten the kid nearly senseless then took him in his arms and vowed he would never let the truth come out. Luckily, Dennis, for whatever crazy reason, had kept one of Tabitha's possessions—a gold locket with a picture of her parents inside. That had kicked the cover-up into full motion.

As with any sexually-motivated crime, the investigative process began with the checking out of all sex-offenders throughout the city and the surrounding environs. It hadn't taken him long to zero in on Otis Weaver—a three-time offender who'd served a seven-year prison term for rape. The man would be perfect for his scheme.

He'd found out Weaver worked a job as a forklift operator, leaving his apartment empty during the day. Perfecto! Picking the cheap lock of the apartment had been easy. Luckily, there wasn't a solitary person around to witness him in the process. Then making sure the lock was wiped clean of his and his brother's fingerprints, he'd slipped it under the mattress of Otis's bed.

At five o'clock that day, knowing Weaver's work shift had come to an end, he'd dropped the man's name to his captain, saying that Otis was a person of interest, and a search warrant was quickly obtained in the event they needed it. The rest was history. Poor fuckin Otis—his arrest, trial, conviction, and death penalty sentence, had all gone so smoothly it was practically laughable. The only thing was—Frank didn't find it particularly funny.

Ah, Jesus, I don't really want to do this. You better never stop thanking me, Dennis. You better keep kissing my ass until the day I die.

Frank walked in and saw the four rows of chairs facing the glass partition of the execution chamber. Tabitha's mother and father and two older brothers were present, as well as a number of newspaper and TV reporters and some state officials. He wanted to grab a seat in the last row, but they were all occupied. The only available chair was in the first row next to Tabitha's mother. He groaned to himself, walked over and sat down.

The woman, who he remembered was named Clarisse, gave him a solemn nod then rested a hand on his knee. "Well, the time has finally arrived. I'm going to see the man sent to hell for what he did to my baby girl." Then she patted his knee. "I know I've done it a hundred times before, but I want to thank you again for bringing the bastard to justice as quickly as you did. I light a candle in church for you every Sunday."

"No thanks are necessary. I was only doing my job."

Clarisse managed a smile. "And on top of everything you're humble."

If you knew the truth, you'd be cursing my very soul.

They waited in silence for another fifteen minutes until the warden and the three-man execution team entered the chamber. Moments later, Otis Weaver was led in by two guards. He was wearing an orange pull-over and trousers, his wrists handcuffed and his ankles shackled.

McGrath saw the man hadn't changed a bit in the course of his five-year incarceration. In fact, it looked as though he'd put on some additional muscle. He was a good six-foot-four and three hundred pounds, with a completely shaven head and barrel chest, his massive arms emblazoned with tattoos from shoulder to wrist. He could have played an arch-villain in a movie. Clarisse gasped and laid her hand on Frank's knee again. "Look at that filthy monster. Just knowing he had his hands on my daughter makes me want to vomit."

Weaver looked through the glass partition and his attention immediately fell on McGrath. He

kept staring; his glittering eyes nothing short of laser beams, meaty lips curled into a sneer.

“He certainly hasn’t forgotten you,” Clarisse whispered.

Goosebumps broke out on Frank’s arm and legs. No, he certainly hasn’t. I don’t know how, but he knows a lot more than he should.

The handcuffs and shackles were quickly removed and Weaver was secured to a gurney with wrist, chest and ankle restraints. Then he was hooked up to an EKG machine which would monitor for a flat line once his heart stopped. Next, a stand was pushed in and an IV tube was set up in which to administer the three necessary drugs.

This whole process shouldn’t take more than eight minutes. Then it’ll finally be over after five long years and three failed appeals.

Frank watched as the sodium thiopental was injected into the tube—a fast-acting barbiturate to depress the central nervous system, rendering Weaver unconscious in about thirty seconds. With that done, the pancuronium bromide was administered to cause muscle paralysis and respiratory arrest. Then the final ingredient was added—potassium chloride to stop the heart.

I’m sorry, Otis—I really am. But my brother came way ahead of a lowlife like you.

And then something happened—something so unbelievable and horrifying the execution chamber and the viewing area were thrown into an immediate pandemonium. Weaver’s body began to jerk and heave, and words started to slur from his mouth.

Clarisse fainted dead away and slumped, her head coming to rest against McGrath’s shoulder.

And then, with an astonishing display of strength, Weaver snapped his wrist and chest restraints, and sat bolt upright, eyes wild, mouth drooling, shouting “Vengeance will be mine” at the top of his lungs.

A reporter leapt to his feet in the back row of chairs. “Holy fuck—they can’t kill the guy!”

The room erupted with shouts and screams, chairs toppling over as the witnesses leapt to their feet.

McGrath looked on in shock. I can’t believe this shit! What’s that bastard made of?

In the chamber, the warden, two of the execution men, and three guards who had rushed in, were holding Weaver’s thrashing body down while the third execution man injected another dose of potassium chloride into the IV tube. It was an extremely large dose.

Frank tossed back his twelfth shot of Jack Daniels and chased it with a glass of beer. “Hit me again, Scott.

Scott McGregor raised a brow. “You’re in a real drinking mood tonight.”

“I haven’t even started yet.”

“I heard they really botched Otis Weaver’s execution.”

“I know—I was right there to witness it. That’s why I’m going to drink myself to oblivion.”

“No shit, you were there?” Scott snapped his fingers. “That’s right—it was you and your partner that nabbed Weaver.”

“Christ, they had to administer enough potassium chloride to kill an elephant. Make it a whole herd of elephants. I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s a thing for a Stephen King novel.”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“I kid you not.”

After serving McGrath another shot and beer, Scott went off to wait on some newly-arrived customers.

Frank was getting a bit fuzzy-brained and blurry-eyed. Since he hadn’t had much to eat all day, he was drinking on an empty stomach. He fumbled his cell phone out of his suit coat pocket and hit the automatic dial for his brother’s number.

It took Dennis nearly a full minute to answer. “Hey, Frank, what’s up? How’d it go with the execution?”

“You haven’t been watching the news, huh?”

“No, I haven’t. Why?”

“I’ll tell you when you get here. I’m at McGregor’s place. Come over and join me.”

“Uh...I really can’t make it right now. I have some company—a very, very attractive lady, who can’t seem to get enough. She’s tuckering me right out.”

“Get your ass over here, right now. I have to tell you what happened.”

“If I do, this lady is not going to be very happy.”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass how unhappy she gets. Just get over here.”

“Give me about forty-five minutes, so I can sneak another quickie in, get dressed and drive the fifteen miles over.”

“Don’t forget who covered your ass, pal. Always keep it in mind.”

Dennis gave a weary sigh. “Boy, you’re going to milk this cow for the rest of your life.”

“You damn well better believe it. Now get the fuck over here. And make it a lot sooner than forty-five minutes.”

Frank made short work of his shot and beer. Then, as he was staring into the mirror over the bar, the wavering image of Otis Weaver appeared in the glass, his thick lips curled into that same sneer.

What the fuck!

McGrath closed his eyes, counted to ten and opened them. The visage was gone.

I’m so cocked-up my imagination is running wild.

He got off the bar stool and staggered to the men’s room to take a leak. As he was standing at the urinal, the room suddenly got cold—to the point of being frigid. Then something brushed past him and moments later there was a gale of throaty laughter. With his heart doing jumping jacks, he whirled and looked around the men’s room but there was nobody there.

I’m suffering from guilt. Yeah, that’s what it is. I saved my brother’s bacon but I’m still an honest detective at heart. I’m supposed to serve and protect, but I dishonoured my badge and did something unspeakable.

He zipped up his fly, washed his hands and headed for the door.

I’m going to need a lot more shots and beers to clear my conscious.

Frank wobbled toward his stool and motioned to Scott. “Hey, fix me up with another round. This time make it a triple shot and a whole pitcher of beer.”

“Uh-uh, no way. You’ve had more than enough already. If you get into an accident and maybe hurt or kill someone, I can be held responsible. I can get my ass sued, plus lose my liquor license and maybe my business.”

“I’m a police detective for Christ-sake.”

“That doesn’t make a lick of difference. Go home and sleep it off.”

Angered, Frank fished three twenties from his wallet and tossed them on the bar.

Frank shook his head to clear it but when he returned his attention to the road there were still three median lines and a slew of blinding headlights in the opposite lane.

Shit! I better ease up on the gas and watch my ass. If something bad happens, my job can be at stake.

Then, before he knew it, the same frigid coldness he'd experienced in the men's room began to invade the car, causing him to shiver. The short hairs on the back of his neck practically stood up on end.

Ah, c'mon—not again!

Then he detected a sudden presence which made him even colder. In that split instant a deep, guttural voice sounded from the passenger's seat.

"One bad turn deserves another, Frank."

He snapped his head to the right and saw the oh-so-vivid image of Otis Weaver—complete with shaven head, dark, glittering eyes, orange duds, tat sleeves and that same fuckin sneer.

"It's time to pay the piper, you sneaky, dishonest fuck!"

"No, no, this can't be!"

Weaver crowded over, wrenched the steering wheel from Frank's grasp and pressed his foot down on the detective's to drive the gas pedal to the floor.

"What are you doing? This is crazy, this is crazy—it can't be for real!"

The car picked up speed, going faster and faster and faster. Then, when a set of headlights appeared in the distance, Weaver steered the car into the other lane and set it on a collision course with the rapidly oncoming vehicle.

"No, no, noooo—you can't do this!"

State police captain, Martin Greenwald, looked at the two twisted cars that looked as though they'd been welded together. Then he glanced around at the road, noting the shards of glass, the metal fragments, the half a muffler, and a blown tire, resting on its side. Up the road, down the road, and in the fields to the left and right, were other mementoes of the tragic collision.

He groaned, scrubbed his face with his hands and looked to the state policeman standing to his right. "So the license plate of the black car checked out to a Frank J. McGrath, who just happens to be a police detective?"

“Yup. What the hell happened here? Was he responsible for this? Was he driving under the influence? Or maybe the other poor guy was.”

“Your guess is as good as mine. If the forensics team can manage to collect some blood samples, we’ll find out soon enough.” The captain shivered at the thought. “I’m glad I won’t have to do it. Both of them are nothing but mush and broken bones.”

“Here’s something that’s going to knock you right out of your shoes.” The state policeman held up a badly twisted license plate. “This is from the other car. I was able to determine the letters and numbers and entered them into my dashboard computer. Guess who the car is registered to?”

The captain gave a weary sigh. “I’m not in a guessing mood. Just tell me.”

“It’s registered to one, Dennis James McGrath. I did some further checking and found out he was the detective’s brother. How’s that for some crazy-ass shit?”

THE END

[Cyrus Song](#)



Cyrus Song

Steve Laker

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PULP POLLUTION by Steve Laker

As a one-time music writer, I'm crapping it, which is what every horror writer wants their readers to do, as they feed them to obesity in a crowded field. When I write fiction, there are parts of me in every story or character I create, but I've rarely lived the actual events in the stories. Now I'm seated alone in Green Inferno, a joint which prides itself on being carnivorous. My first observation is that if you're in the story yourself, it's not so easy to make it up as you go along.

The place is cavernous and filled with greenery, so that the experience is one of dining in a plastic south American forest, alone. As I look around, it's hard to make out many other diners for the dense foliage, which eases my anxiety. Anyone walking through the bushes around me could be a customer, a lost tribe member, or one of the dishes. I hear running water but I can't see a toilet. I turn my attention to the menu, which is the other point of this place.

It's a meat restaurant, but with its focus on food provenance. All their dishes are locally sourced, and every cut of meat is traceable to an individual. Reared by organic local farmers, each animal was once a friend, and so every dish comes with a story, like Peter Davison at The Restaurant at the End of the Universe, describing his lifestyle and how that's improved his finer cuts.

Mine is a shallow hunger, so I browse the appetisers. Among them, I'm intrigued by the pygmy cutlets. The beast once burdened by these isn't described by species (I assume pork, from a pig), but as a character:

He (we're told that much) was unwell for much of his short life (not terribly appetising so far). Bullied by his siblings and shunned by his elders, he'd been adopted by other animals. They stop short of actually naming the individuals here, but I gather this little chap had a bit of an identity crisis (I know how he felt).

Another of these pygmy things sounded a bit of an arse: His partner and children had fled his abusive patriarchy, then he'd been ejected by his drift (the collective noun for swine) and become a nomad (and no mates). For years he wandered with lonely guilt, until he died of a broken heart (impaled). In some respects, I could relate to him too.

The stories of the menu certainly make me question whether I should be eating what was once a sentient, self-determining being like me. As a horror writer, I've sometimes reflected on the act of consuming dead flesh, questioning if it might be both the most and least respectful way of disposing of a body. On the one hand, it's everything which was in that living body being taken on by another (so a bit like holy communion). Conversely, it's power over the body of the lost soul as it's consumed (not unlike holy communion then).

I decided on a cut from each, whoever they were. While they remained nameless, they'd be just like any other meat on my plate. As food, once the organism has ceased to function, it becomes organic. It's consumed, drained of its nutrients for the nourishment of the host, then what's left is excreted as waste: Life as pulp fiction, picked up on airport news-stands, consumed in the air, and cast into the bin on different shores, like so much human waste. Perhaps there are beach

combers there, and some stories live again, but I was growing distracted in the plastic green inferno.

My stomach was growing cramped, like my surroundings; vegetation everywhere, but not a leaf to eat. And yet, the dishes I'd ordered were once living beings with stories. I owed them enough respect to eat them while they were still warm.

I'm not sure if it was a server or a customer who ran through the foliage behind me. I couldn't tell if the sound of flowing water was from a distant stream or the glass now being poured beside me, as my food arrived. I couldn't wait.

I dined alone as always, with only myself for company, pondering publication of this review. The writer who shit himself.

"Door open or closed?" It made no difference, as I passed an effigy of me. It appeared to smile as I flushed it away to some distant beach.

THE END

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[Schlock! Presents: Ghostlands](#)

Ghostlands



A Book of Ghost Stories

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THE VERTICAL CITY by Gavin Chappell

The four adventurers scrambled down into the frozen valley, their feet kicking up a spray of snow as they followed the ice-choked waters downstream. 'Where's that bridge?' Gerald gasped, his breath like smoke as it whipped away from his mouth.

Percy shook his head despairingly as he and the other two raced behind. 'Up ahead,' he replied. 'That's what Crinan said.'

Gerald clamped his teeth together. The wolfman had died saving them. He didn't want a reminder.

The ravine broadened out ahead of them and Gerald saw a wideish space beside a small waterfall of icicles. Snow-hung scrub grew all around them. He risked a look over his shoulder, and saw, silhouetted against the dark skies, a huge night-wolf standing on an outcrop above them, looking down. As Gerald watched, more wolves flooded out across the snow on either side.

Now the ravine grew narrower and narrower, and there was hardly space enough to run in single file alongside the stream. The crags beetled above. Gerald hoped the path would get no narrower. He didn't rate their chances highly if any of them fell into the icy water that rushed past; even if the cold didn't kill them, they would be battered to death on the rocks.

They rounded a corner, and Percy cried out in relief.

'Look!' he yelled, his finger jabbing upwards.

'What is it?' shouted Norman.

'I see it!' Brian broke in. Gerald had seen it too; a wide rope-bridge hung across the narrow ravine, high above. This must be the bridge that Crinan had mentioned. But how could they reach it?

'Get climbing,' Percy muttered, seizing hold of icy outcropping rock and hauling himself up the side of the ravine. Brian joined him, scrambling up the cliff like a mountain goat.

Norman looked at Gerald, his eyes wide in the darkness. Gerald heard the howling and snarling of the pursuing wolves from behind him.

'Up there!' Gerald told the smaller lad, and he drew his sword.

'What are you going to do?' Norman gasped, his eyes even wider.

'Do as you're told!' Gerald snarled. With a gulp, Norman turned and started climbing.

Gerald swung round, his sword a glimmer of silver in the moonlight. The wolves came leaping through the snow. He lunged with his sword, splitting the skull of the first one. Black blood

spattered the snow.

‘That’s for Crinan!’ he spat.

He sheathed his still-bloody blade and leapt up onto the nearby outcrop. For a moment he glared down at the gathering night-wolves as they prowled beneath him, snapping their teeth. Then he turned and began to haul himself up the precarious, icy precipice.

The snarls and howls of the wolves came from below, receding slightly as he climbed further. But wolves can’t climb. Several days among the mountains had taught Gerald that much.

As the wolf-howls died away, Gerald heard a new noise breaking the night’s still. A thundering, rumbling noise, punctuated by a clatter of hoofs. It grew nearer as Gerald reached the end of the rope-bridge where the other three now crouched, looking over the edge of the cliff.

Percy looked back down to catch Gerald’s eyes.

‘Shit,’ he complained. ‘I thought the wolves had got you.’

‘What’s that noise?’ Gerald demanded as he hauled himself up to join them.

He followed their gaze to see a wide, snowy vista sweeping up into the mountains. There it was, the road that they had abandoned after the wolf-attack; it wound down and down from the pass into Overwold, glimmering in the moonlight. But something was coming down it, heading straight for the wide rope-bridge. What was it? More trouble?

‘Come on, why don’t we get moving?’ Brian said. ‘Over the rope-bridge and back onto the road!’

‘What?’ Percy asked. ‘With that thing coming down? We don’t even know what it is.’ It was too far off in the darkness to be recognisable. ‘We don’t want it coming up behind us.’

‘It looks like it’s as keen to get out of the mountains as we are,’ Norman remarked.

Gerald caught sight of something else coming down the road, in the far distance, pursuing the first shape, which was growing closer now. He realised that the first thing was a large merchant caravan; several wagons tied together, hauled by fast-moving, giant cat-like creatures with great woolly hides. It was now on the last stretch, where the road crossed a flat plain leading towards the ravine and the rope-bridge.

‘They’ll have to slow down for the bridge,’ Gerald remarked.

‘What are you thinking?’ Percy asked darkly.

Gerald shrugged. ‘They want to get out of the mountains,’ he said. He cast a look down into the ravine, where the dark shapes of wolves still prowled. ‘So do we. I reckon we join up with them.’

‘Looks like they’ve got troubles of their own,’ said Percy, his voice full of foreboding.

‘So they’ll be glad of the help,’ Gerald argued. ‘And we can hitch a lift in return.’

‘Help?’ Percy asked. ‘What can we do to help them? More likely we’ll slow them down!’

Gerald said nothing. He was studying the ropes that kept the wide bridge suspended over the ravine, deep in thought.

He was dragged from his reverie by a rumbling, grinding noise as the merchant caravan lumbered towards the bridge. As Gerald had predicted, they were slowing down. He saw figures standing at the opening of the first covered wagon, peering back in the direction from which they had come. As the giant cat creatures drew closer, Gerald stepped out into the middle of the roadway, just in front of the approach to the bridge.

‘What are you doing, idiot?’ Percy hissed.

Gerald ignored him. He shouted up at the figures in the front wagon, ‘Where are you going?’

They turned, and Gerald saw a thickset middle-aged man and a younger man, who looked overdressed even in this darkness. The middle-aged man shouted; ‘Out of the way!’

‘Bandits!’ exclaimed his companion. ‘Worse and worse!’

‘We’re not bandits,’ Gerald called. ‘We want to help you.’

‘What’s in it for you?’ asked the thickset man.

‘We’ve got a message to take to Trinovant,’ Gerald replied. ‘That where you’re going? Take us with you and we’ll deal with your pursuers.’

By this time the caravan had halted at the bridge approach. The giant cats peered down at Gerald, snarling their disapproval. The thickset man looked down at Gerald and his friends, still lurking beside the bridge.

‘What can you do to help us?’ he shouted. ‘Those ogres are pursuing us!’

‘Ogres?’ Gerald bellowed. ‘Then the attack’s started. Not a moment to lose. Let us up on-board and we’ll help you!’

He didn’t give them time to argue, dashing past the giant cats and scrambling aboard.

‘Come on, lads,’ he told the others. Cautiously, Percy, Brian and Norman joined him.

Gerald found himself face-to-face with the overdressed younger man. The thickset older man

goaded the cats onwards, and slowly the wagons began to move onto the bridge, which bowed alarmingly under their weight.

‘Who invited you aboard?’ the overdressed man sneered. He set his hand on the jewelled hilt of a dagger at his belt.

Without taking his eyes off the cats, the older man spoke. ‘Let them stay.’ Gerald now saw he had a close resemblance to the younger man, like father and son. ‘If they truly can help us, well—we need it! If not, I wouldn’t leave anyone to the mercy of those ogres.’

‘It’s really important we get to Trinovant,’ Percy chipped in. ‘Those ogres are only part of a huge army that’s going to attack the city. If we don’t get through, they will be taken unawares.’

By now the merchant caravan was halfway across the rope-bridge.

‘That pestilential hellhole?’ the overdressed man said with another sneer. ‘If only someone could wipe it from the map—and take the House of Kayliff with it!’

‘What’s that?’ Percy asked. ‘Oh, by the way,’ he added, ‘I’m Percy.’ He introduced his friends.

‘And I am Murcio,’ said the overdressed man, importantly, ‘of the House of Estraldio. This is my father, Estraldio himself.’

‘What’s the House of Estraldio?’ Gerald asked absently. He peered round the side of the covered wagon, towards the road where even now riding figures were growing larger.

‘We are the finest merchant adventurers in Trinovant, that city of merchant adventurers,’ Estraldio said. ‘We dare any deed, so long as it turns a profit.’

‘And preferably if there’s no real risk to our necks,’ Murcio added quietly.

The first covered wagon came down the far side of the bridge with a thump. Slowly the straining giant cats hauled the entire caravan onto the roadway beyond, which led into the depths of snow-hung pine forest. Gerald leapt down onto the icy ground and drew his sword.

‘You’re not going to wait for the ogres and fight them?’ Percy demanded.

‘Cool!’ said Brian. He jumped down to join Gerald, swinging his war-hammer with a grin.

‘I don’t think this is a good idea,’ Norman said worriedly.

‘Don’t be a fool, lad,’ Estraldio called. ‘They’ll slaughter you!’

Gerald sighed. ‘If you’ve quite finished...’ He brought his sword down on the first of the thick ropes that kept the rope bridge suspended above the ravine.

Brian frowned, and looked uncertainly at his war-hammer. Percy and Norman jumped down to join them.

‘I get it!’ Percy hacked at the other main rope. ‘We’ll bring the rope-bridge down! Like that one on the other side of the mountains.’

‘Yeah,’ said Gerald, remembering the way they had escaped from the pursuit of animated statues, ‘but this time we’re going to stay up top.’

As the caravan rumbled on, the youths attacked the ropes with their swords, or in Brian’s case, smashed at the wooden joists with his war-hammer. Faces appeared peering out from under the canvas of the passing wagons, and Gerald realised that Murcio and Estraldio were not the only members of the caravan.

At last, as the caravan entered the forest beyond, the ropes went and the entire bridge went tumbling down into the ravine, to be heralded by savage snarling and growling. The wolves still waited below.

Gerald looked across the gap to see huge, burly, hairy, tusk-toothed, familiar figures mounted on war-bison, reach the other side and glare angrily across. The pursuing ogres had reached the edge of the ravine.

‘Yah!’ shouted Brian gleefully, capering up and down and waving his war-hammer. ‘Can’t catch us!’

An ogre produced a recurved bow and sent a mighty shaft speeding towards him. Brian tripped over Gerald’s outstretched foot and the arrow, like a bolt from a ballista, vanished into the trees.

‘Come on, after that merchant caravan,’ Gerald said, yanking him up by the scruff of his neck. ‘Before they find a way across.’

Under a hail of more arrows and bolts from the frustrated ogres, the four youths raced down the icy road in pursuit of the caravan.

‘Wait for us!’ Norman called. ‘We saved you!’

As the forest widened into a clearing, the merchant caravan halted in the middle of the road. A familiar thickset figure leapt down from one side, then, with more dignity, a taller, slimmer figure jumped down. As they approached the four adventurers, more people swarmed from the wagons.

‘You saved us!’ a middle-aged woman exclaimed in strident tones as Estraldio and Murcio reached the youths and shook their hands. ‘Without you we would have been slaughtered by the ogres.’

Gerald strode forward. ‘Okay, right,’ he said. ‘Could have been, could have been. But those

ogres aren't any pussies. I've fought beside ogres. They're not as thick as they look. They'll find a way to get over that ravine. And they're just the spearhead of a vast army which is going to attack Trinovant. We'd better get going. We have to warn the city before the army of the king descends from the mountains.'

'The king?' Estraldio, the thickset leader of the merchant caravan, paled as white as the surrounding snow. 'The king is coming here?'

'We'd better get moving!' said the woman. 'You knew this was a possibility, Estraldio. This absurd idea of following the king's highway.'

'A remote risk, Karmina my dear,' Estraldio mumbled, his capable persona crushed. 'But you are right. We must move at once.' He turned towards several hulking men who had descended from the other wagons. 'Wagoners! We must move at once! It is imperative that we reach Trinovant as soon as we can!'

The merchant adventurer turned to the three boys. 'Jump up and join us,' he said. 'You must take your message to the Prince of Trinovant.'

A couple of burly wagoners came forward to help Gerald and his friends up into the first wagon of the train. Pushing through a curtain Gerald found himself in a lamp-lit, tapestry-hung space, made warm and inviting by a brazier, the vibrant colours of the rugs and hangings, and the wide-eyed beauty of the girl who sat beside the brazier, looking up as Gerald entered.

She was called Cassalina, Gerald soon learnt as he and his friends sat among the rugs and cushions of the forward wagon with Estraldio, his wife Karmina, his overdressed son Murcio, and the soft-spoken, glad-eyed girl who, it seemed, was his ... what? Girlfriend? Fiancée? Prostitute? Gerald wasn't quite sure what her status was, although Karmina clearly disapproved and Estraldio pointedly never addressed the girl.

As the merchant caravan rumbled onwards through the night towards the city of Trinovant, and the House of Estraldio shared their hospitality with the young adventurers, he found himself wondering. He'd never seen such a beautiful girl. As they ate spiced dishes and drank mulled wines he covertly studied her. Okay, Immiel had been pretty nice, pretty exotic, but, fuck—Cassalina, with her bold, serious, proud, insolent, kohl-rimmed eyes; her ruby-red lips; her arched eyebrows black as sin like ravens flying across the snow of her white, white skin; her long black eyelashes, and her lustrous hair like a torrent of darkness cascading down her virginal white gown, was like nothing he'd ever seen, not even among the oh-so sophisticated goth sixth formers in the girls' school.

That night, when he slept among the rugs and perfumes of the forward wagon, Gerald's dreams were haunted by her, that girl who was only a few years older than him; who seemed to belong somehow to that trendy fool Murcio; whose lisping name thrilled like a whisper of the wind, a trailing tendril of delight across his weary shoulders... Cassalina...

The next day, the wagons continued their journey. When Gerald awoke and went to find breakfast, a glimpse outside showed passing hillsides but not so much as a snowdrift.

‘What happened to all the snow?’ he asked Percy, joining him at the front flap of the forward wagon.

Percy shrugged. A hulking wagoner sat stolidly on the wagon-seat before them, his back to them, looking out over the backs of the cats. He wasn’t speaking. But ahead lay a wide, arid-looking plain. Beyond it, blue in the distance, were other hills, climbing higher and higher.

Gerald peered out round the side. A chill breeze ruffled his hair. High above him stood snow-topped mountains. The king’s highway wound away into the dusty distance.

He returned to Percy.

‘Looks like we’re out of the mountains at last.’

‘So we are,’ boomed Estraldio, coming out of the wagon to join them. ‘A shame. I hoped to have good business that way.’

‘What is your business, anyway?’ Percy asked.

Estraldio studied him. ‘Selling,’ he said expansively.

‘Selling what?’ Gerald inquired.

Estraldio laughed. ‘I buy cheap in one place, I sell dear in another,’ he said. ‘I buy anything that’s wanted. I lead my own merchant caravan, unlike my competitors, and I am always on the search for new routes to follow. My competitors keep to the Wagon Road, which is well maintained and safe but slow and plodding. I took the king’s highway in hopes it would help me steal a march, but I dismissed the possibilities that the king would be in these parts. No king has been seen here in generations.’

‘Won’t you come back in? Skabrat says breakfast will soon be ready.’

Gerald ducked back under the flap and entered the lantern-lit gloom of the wagon. The others were sitting up now, and in the middle of the floor a cauldron had been set up over a metal tray of glowing coals. The contents were bubbling away.

Crouching over them was a small, wizened figure. To Gerald’s horror, it looked like a diminutive orc, though its body and much of its face were swathed in scarves.

‘What’s he doing there?’ Gerald leapt back and scrambled for his sword. He remembered that

he'd left it lying in the wagon where he'd spent the night.

Cassalina rose from the rugs where she had slept, and laughed a low, throaty laugh. The wizened little orc stared from Gerald to Cassalina.

'Your guest has not met desert orcs before?' it asked in a dry, dusty voice.

'I've met orcs before!' Gerald said. He looked to Brian and Norman, who were both staring at the creature in horror.

Cassalina's eyes met Gerald's. 'Don't worry,' she said. 'He's harmless.'

'This is Skabrat,' said Estraldio impatiently. 'A menial. Skabrat! Serve breakfast!'

'Yes, master,' said Skabrat in servile tones. He began to ladle out a kind of rice stew into several bowls which he handed to each of the travellers.

Gerald took his own steaming bowl and a horn spoon and prodded the rice queasily. After a pause, he nerved himself and tried it. It was good! Spicy and hot, chilli hot. He'd never guessed orcs could be such good cooks.

'Compliments to the chef,' he said after wolfing it all down, along with gobletsful of a sweet, dark drink that Cassalina called *gahveh* but which seemed like nothing so much as strong spiced coffee to Gerald. Skabrat had gone by now, disappeared into the wagon behind this one. Cassalina dimpled at him and laughed again.

'You like desert orc cooking?' she asked. 'He has been well-trained, but his people have an aptitude.'

'They do wonders with desert scorpion and cactus mush in their own country,' remarked the foppish Murcio, who was still savouring the rice stew. 'The scorpions sometimes grow to seven feet across, and the desert orcs hunt them down with nothing more than knives made from the teeth of the sand-behemoth.'

'How interesting,' said Percy in sardonic tones.

'We're not going there, are we?' Norman asked worriedly. He looked at Estraldio, who had joined them for breakfast. The merchant gave a booming laugh.

'No! Not this season. No, we return to Trinovant. The citizen army will deal with the king's incursion, it is to be hoped. Then we can return to business. I hope to trade in Kashamash.'

Gerald looked at the other three. 'Er, that might be difficult,' he said slowly. 'You see, before we met the king, we were in Kashamash. It was attacked by barbarians. Last we saw, they were burning the place to the ground.'

Estraldio's face fell. 'Indeed, you are harbingers of the storm,' he muttered, regaining his composure.

The merchant caravan continued its progress across the lowlands. Gerald spent a lot of time on the wagon seat, looking out over the rocky landscape. In places he saw farms or small villages. Fields surrounded them; they were irrigated by small canals that brought water down from the snowy peaks, Cassalina explained, sitting beside him. Murcio sat on the other side of the silent wagoner, watching them suspiciously.

Gerald and his friends got to know the seven linked wagons of the merchant caravan and the giant cats that drew them over the following, uneventful days as they passed through the Trinovantian hinterland. Despite the threat of war from the mountains, it felt like a holiday after their recent adventures, and gave them all a chance to unwind. It gave Gerald an opportunity to get to know Cassalina better, although at first he was tongue-tied in her presence.

It became apparent that the girl was Murcio's girlfriend, or paramour as she put it. Gerald was shocked to learn that she was as much a menial as Skabrat, hired from a troupe of dancing girls in Hollowdale over the desert to the east to fulfil this position. Turned out that a lot of people in Trinovant were menials; they worked for the citizens in return for food and lodging, and money.

They were paid, so they could buy liberty and citizenship, but the rate at which they were paid it was only in old age that they could gain freedom. Cassalina seemed to think this normal, but Gerald could see that the whole system was designed to keep menials in servitude to the citizens. But it seemed that all was not well between Cassalina and Murcio anyway, and she did her best to avoid the overdressed man, apparently preferring Gerald's company. Which suited Gerald. The idea that she might find him attractive excited him, thrilled him, kept him awake at night.

On the third day, they joined a busy, paved road, with wagons passing up and down it.

'The Wagon-Road,' said Estraldio.

Gerald laughed. 'We left that weeks ago,' he said, looking round at his friends. 'Remember? By Kashamash. We left it and went up into the hills instead.'

'Maybe we'd have had a better journey if we'd stayed,' said Norman quietly.

Soon a city grew visible ahead; a city of spires and towers and walls and walkways of many different styles, built in the gap between two high cliffs. It was a vertical city, crisscrossed with road- and pathways between buildings which were piled higgledy-piggledy on top of each other. Some were stone, some polished marble, others were half-timbered.

A huge river flowed out from the walls, racing down the valley to the south, carrying several large boats and even tall three-masted ships. A gate arched over the Wagon-Road itself, leading

into the dark depths of the city, and it was towards this that they were heading. Smoke from cooking fires rose from the vertical city, bringing exotic smells floating up the valley towards the travellers.

Gerald looked at Estraldio. 'Trinovant?'

Estraldio nodded. 'The city of the mountains,' he said. 'One of the two most powerful cities in Riparia.'

'What's the other one, Kashamash?' Percy asked.

Estraldio shook his head. 'Kashamash has always paid tribute to Trinovant. No, the other great city lies at the other end of that river upon which Trinovant is built. The river and the city at its mouth share a name: Cosht.'

'I'm sure these lads find the geography lesson fascinating, father,' Murcio interrupted. 'But we have important news for the Prince.'

Estraldio inclined his head in acknowledgement. He turned and gave orders for the wagoner to take them to the palace of Augustus, Prince of Trinovant.

They entered the city, driving through busy cobbled streets that stank of refuse. They were down among the lower levels, where the buildings, however fine architecturally, were grimy and neglected, like the people who passed on either side, and the carts in the street.

Soon, however, the wagoner directed the merchant caravan up a wide ramp-like roadway that led them up to another level, where walkways and roadways passed among cleaner, more prosperous-looking buildings where the streets were packed with elaborate carriages and passers-by were dressed in sombre yet elegant clothes. Gerald shuddered as he imagined the havoc the king's army could create if it reached Trinovant.

Many of the houses were grandly built with marble porticos and fluted columns, though these buildings still remained in the shadow of edifices above them, some of which clung to the sides of the ravine in which Trinovant had been built, others seemed to have been built on the very roofs of the lower buildings, or clung to the arching roadways.

The merchant caravan was dwarfed by this complex spider's web of building as it traversed ramp after ramp and roadway after roadway in the direction of the highest spire of all, which Estraldio identified as the Prince's palace.

But before they reached the palace, they turned off the main roadway and entered the courtyard of a palatial house that lay in its shadow. This, it turned out, was the veritable House of Estraldio itself, where they abandoned the wagons for a carriage bearing a coat of arms. This they took up the last ramp.

At last they came to a rest outside the ebony gates of the palace and Estraldio sent menials inside

with news of a vital message for the Prince.

Shortly after, they were ushered into a wide, echoing hallway where footmen ushered them to hard, cold, marble benches where they had to wait for several hours while Estraldio paced back and forth and grew increasingly frustrated. Eventually, a small door opened in the high double doors that dominated the far end of the room and out trotted a small peacock of a man, followed by a retinue of similar fops, although none of them was as exquisitely clad as the little man at their head.

‘Estraldio the Merchant Adventurer!’ the peacock drawled. ‘What brings you to the high halls of the mighty Prince Augustus? I thought you once again bravely leading your caravan through the wild places of the world.’

‘Kayliff the Popinjay,’ Estraldio acknowledged starkly. ‘No doubt brown-nosing your way into a new monopoly. While I come with vital news!’

Kayliff raised an eyebrow inquiringly but Estraldio shook his head. ‘For the Prince’s ears only.’

‘Show him in,’ a voice boomed from behind the double doors.

Footmen issued through the doorway, followed by halberdiers in half armour. The lead footman beckoned to Estraldio.

‘The Prince will grant you this extraordinary audience,’ the footman said in a grating voice. ‘But he hopes it will prove worth his time. He has urgent business with the Guild of Carpet Weavers.’

Estraldio turned to Gerald and his friends. ‘You lads had better come with me,’ he said. ‘You know more about the situation than I do.’ Nodding to the others, he said, ‘Remain here.’

Escorted by footmen and halberdiers Gerald and his companions entered the presence of Augustus, Prince of Trinovant.

‘If what these boys are saying is true, we must muster the citizen army at once!’

Prince Augustus’ face had turned grey on hearing the halting report that Gerald had given, prompted at times by Estraldio and elaborated by Percy, Norman, or even at one point, by Brian. The Prince was a skeletally-thin man who dressed in voluminous furs despite the baking heat of the braziers that blazed on either side of the stone-walled, tapestry-hung, thickly-carpeted room. He listened patiently, blood draining slowly from rouge-painted skin. At last, he rose to his feet and confronted them all across his massive, cluttered desk.

‘Yes, my lord,’ said Estraldio. ‘I have not seen the king’s army with my own eyes, yet when my merchant caravan entered the peaks, we were set upon by ogres like those these lads describe, doubtless scouts or outliers of the whole force.’

The Prince brooded, hooding his eyes and gazing into the distance. Gerald thought that he really ought to get a move on.

‘The king!’ the Prince said scornfully. ‘In Trinovant we long ago outgrew the need for such parasitic overlords. Even in the old city, that has lain mouldering some miles off since the Hurun incursions, my forefathers saw that behind thick walls we Trinovantians needed the protection of no king; besides, we thought ourselves safe with their protection. In a hundred years none of been as rash as to attack us and the city’s walls themselves, once famed throughout the land, have been allowed to crumble, or been used as a promenade for fashionable citizens. It is imperative that we meet the enemy long before they reach our gates.

He turned back to his visitors. ‘Go now in honour,’ he said. ‘Send in my chamberlain. I must call to me all the generals of the city and we shall plan our campaign. There is not a moment to be lost!’

Thank fuck for that, Gerald thought to himself as they hurried from Prince Augustus’ office. He’d honestly thought the Prince was going to spend so much time brooding dramatically that the enemy would reach the gates before he reached a decision!

After a short journey down the winding roadways of the city, the carriage entered the courtyard of Estraldio’s house, where the wagons of the caravan had been parked.

‘I’ll tell the menials to prepare rooms for you, lads,’ the merchant adventurer said.

‘Great,’ Gerald began, with a quick look out at the courtyard to where Cassalina was awaiting, with a demure expression on her face. Murcio stood beside her, and Estraldio’s wife Karmina was nearby. ‘I...’

Percy leaned forward. ‘We can’t really stay,’ he said. ‘We’re on our way to the Tower of Photogenia in the Northern Wastes.’

Gerald gave him a pained look. Okay, that had been what they’d been trying to do before they got mixed up in all this rescuing Trinovant business, but he had other things he wanted to do before they left this world.

Estraldio raised an eyebrow. ‘Oh?’ he said. ‘You haven’t mentioned this before. The sorceress Photogenia...’

‘That’s our real mission,’ Norman broke in. ‘We’re going to ask her to send us back to our own world.’

Gerald ground his teeth. He was about to say something really scathing when Estraldio said, ‘Oh, but you must stay. You’re heroes in our city now; the young lads who brought the news of our advancing enemies. I’ll be arranging banquets and performances in your honour. They’ll be no good if the honoured guests are over the hills and far away.’

He laid a hand on Gerald's arm as they disembarked from the carriage.

'I'm sure we could work out a bargain,' he went on. 'You remain here while the citizen army mobilises and fights off the king's attackers. When the victory is announced, we'll have a feast in your honour. Then I'll personally escort you through the Hanging Hills and across the Desert of Dread to Hollowdale, from where you will easily find a route across the Northern Wastes to the tower of the famous Photogenia.'

'You're very confident,' Percy remarked. 'What if the citizen army is defeated? What if the king comes to Trinovant, and destroys it like he destroyed Ogres' Gate?'

Karmina, who had been listening, broke in impatiently. 'So that's it!' she said. 'You want to run away from our city. I thought you were brave, all of you. But now I see you wish to flee as soon as you have given your message.'

Cassalina added, 'The citizen army will defeat the king. From what Gerald has told me, the king's army had already met with fighting; the citizens will be fresh, and fighting for their own livelihoods. Although Master Estraldio is too old to fight, Murcio here will be answering the call; won't you, my love?'

Murcio gulped, and looked about him with a hunted expression. 'Of course, my love,' he said vaguely. 'I'll buy myself an officer's commission in the supply corps...'

Gerald gave a quick grin. He could see Cassalina was eager to see the back of Murcio. Now, if only he could persuade Percy and the others to stay, the coast would be clear for all kinds of hijinks.

'Yeah, Percy,' he said. 'Why not stay here? We'll be heroes with these people. They'll sort out the king and we'll be rewarded. Then we can get to Photogenia's tower with the aid of Estraldio here. No more sleeping under a bush every night. Travel in style...'

'Sounds cool!' Brian burst out. He had been looking bored by the discussion. 'As long as we get into plenty of fights along the way!' He lifted his war-hammer high above his head and posed dramatically.

The next day, Murcio was gone before the boys were up for breakfast. Gerald had looked out from behind a curtain in their sleeping chamber as the pale-faced dandy sat astride a barded war-cat down in the courtyard with the aid of menials. He was wearing heavy plate armour, and strapped to his back was a two-handed broadsword that Brian would have been proud of, but he looked terrified. Estraldio, Karmina and Cassalina gave him a curt farewell from the steps to the house before he trotted off to join the citizen army.

It was mustering in the river meadows outside the city wall, visible from up here as hundreds of tiny dots on an expanse of green far away. The dining chamber downstairs had a large window that looked out over the cityscape, the levels receding dizzily below, and the fields and hills

beyond the ravine walls. As the boys joined Estraldio, Karmina and Cassalina for breakfast, distant trumpet blasts and shouted orders drifted up from the river.

‘Ah, me,’ said Estraldio dreamily. ‘I recall the days of my youth, when I too rode with the citizen army, during the Carpet Wars with Cosht... Such adventures.’

Karmina smiled fondly at him. ‘You were a most valiant youth,’ she murmured.

Gerald frowned. ‘Carpet Wars?’ he asked. ‘Why did you go to war over carpets?’

‘Or did you fight using carpets?’ asked Brian with a giggle.

Estraldio shrugged. ‘Cosht controls the main seaways of Riparia,’ he said. ‘One of Trinovant’s main exports is our rugs and carpets and tapestries, woven from the wool of mountain cats. They are greatly prized in the lowlands, but Cosht refused to accept our prices, and began a rival trade, importing tree-wool from the Spice Islands. Naturally, war was unavoidable.’

After breakfast, Percy drew Gerald to one side. ‘We’ve got to get away from this lunatic place,’ he said in urgent tones. ‘Come on, what if the king gets here? All we want to do is get to Photogenia and get away from this planet!’

Gerald was watching as Cassalina walked in the terrace garden behind the house, a parasol over one shoulder. The terrace commanded splendid views of the city and the lands beyond.

‘We deserve a rest, and that army will give the king a well-deserved twatting,’ he said. ‘Anyway, we can’t just walk out of the place, it would be fucking rude.’

‘I don’t think they’ll let us,’ Percy added. ‘But I worked out a way we could get out of here last night, from our window. We climb round the side of the house, then down below, onto the girders that keep it up. Then we can climb down to the roadway below and be off in the darkness...’

‘You’re the one who’s mad,’ Gerald said absently, still watching Cassalina.

‘It’s no crazier than what we’ve done before,’ Percy argued. ‘Anyway, why are you so keen to lounge around here? Anyone would think...’ He halted, following Gerald’s gaze. ‘For fuck’s sake, Gerald!’ he blazed.

Gerald ignored him, gazing still at Cassalina’s carefree figure. After a moment, Percy turned abruptly and went to talk with the others.

Over the next few days, Cassalina walked often in the garden. At one end of it a small tower jutted out from the side of the house, and this tower contained Estraldio’s study, where he worked every day, toiling over letters, convening meetings with other merchant princes, formulating marketing strategy and studying maps in search of new trading routes.

Gerald was nervous about this, knowing that Estraldio could look out at any moment and see where his son's paramour was walking, and at first this deterred him from going to join her. But one morning, he plucked up his courage.

Her face brightened and she gave him an indulgent smile.

'I've seen so little of you since we returned,' she said. 'I assumed you were spending time with your friends.'

Gerald gave a contemptuous shrug. 'They're alright,' he said. 'Except they keep scrapping all the time.' The others were bored with hanging around. They wanted to get going. Brian had stated categorically that he wished he'd joined the citizen army and gone to fight the king. Percy said he just wanted the army to come back so they could get the victory celebrations over and done with and get the fuck out of here. Norman said he really thought it was time they went back home because they were missing out on school. For some reason, this had led to a fight and Percy and Brian had had to be separated by one of the menials.

'I miss our time together on the caravan,' Cassalina said, linking arms with Gerald and leading him up the path that wound through the garden. Butterflies fluttered about the flowers, and the heady perfume was seductive.

'So do I,' said Gerald, heartfelt. He looked longingly at her and her eyes brushed his. The pulse raced within him. Now that Murcio was out of the way, hopefully never to return, maybe things might go somewhere.

The sun was setting over the western cliffs when the citizen army returned in a black mood. Gerald was watching from the terrace, accompanied by Cassalina. Only moments before, he had asked her to meet him that night, when everyone else was asleep. She had yet to give an answer. The appearance of the army had seized the attention of both of them.

Soon, as news spread, the lads joined them, and finally Estraldio and his wife Karmina appeared, at whose joint presence Gerald moved ostentatiously away from Cassalina.

'Back so soon,' the merchant adventurer said darkly.

'They must have won,' said Cassalina. 'I had thought they would remain at war for some weeks at least.'

Gerald nodded as Percy, Brian and Norman chattered. This easy victory surprised him. From what he had seen of the king's army, he thought the Trinovantian citizens would have found victory a lot harder. Well, maybe Murcio had been killed anyway, and he could safely make his move.

'That's not a victorious army.' Estraldio brooded.

Gerald looked at him in surprise. 'They haven't been defeated,' he said. 'If they had, they wouldn't be strolling back like that. And the king's army would be chasing them.'

'They do look pretty relaxed,' Percy agreed.

Estraldio shook his head. 'When the citizen army returns in victory, they wave their banners high and give trumpet blasts. They lead prisoners by chains and push cartloads of booty. They are drunken and joyful. This is a gloomy host. They have not won.'

It made no sense to Gerald as the army entered the city and slowly dispersed among the winding streets, roadways and levels. They had not won; they had not lost, either. What had happened?

'Murcio will be returning,' Cassalina said. She showed no joy. If only the army had not come back so soon, Gerald thought. He was sure that she would have agreed to meet him that night, and then—well...

But it wasn't to be.

As the citizen army separated and its soldiers trudged dolefully back to their homes, one mounted figure grew distinct, riding a war-cat up to the House of Estraldio.

'We must meet him,' Karmina said.

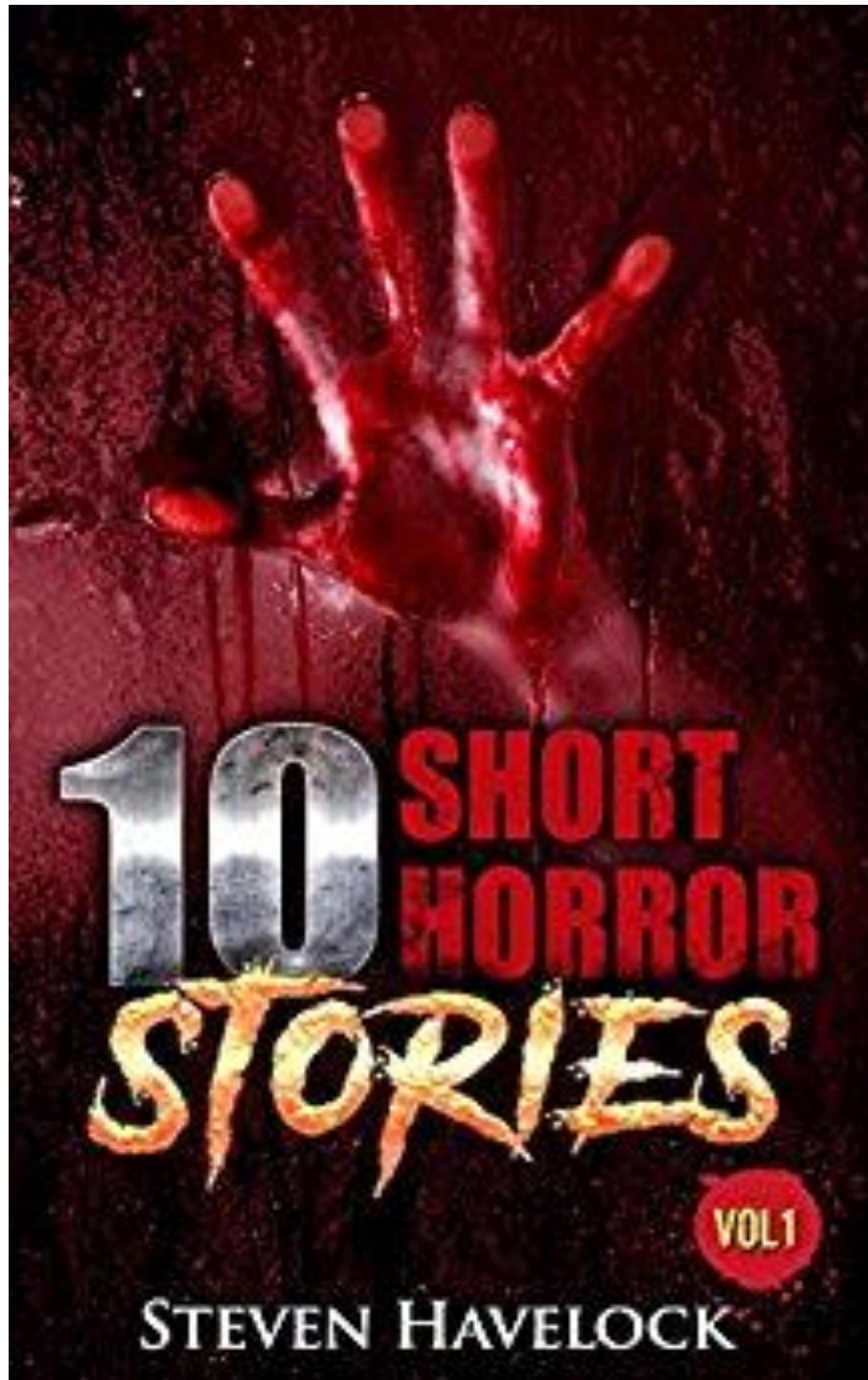
They awaited his return in the courtyard. As Murcio rode in, looking grim-faced yet heroic, much to Gerald's jealousy, Skabrat scuttled forward to seize the war-cat's reins and lead it to a mounting block near the corner where the wagons of the caravan had been parked. Slowly, his armour creaking, Murcio dismounted. Stripping off his riding gauntlets and tugging at his armour as the desert orc struggled to undo the straps, he approached.

'What happened?' Estraldio asked, his voice dark. 'You have no booty. The army gave no victory blasts. Yet you have no wounds. Is it defeat? Did the citizen army flee their foe without giving fight?'

Murcio sighed. 'Let me speak!' he hissed. He looked contemptuously at the boys. 'Shame is upon us, aye. Yet it is chiefly upon the House of Estraldio. There is no king's army in the mountains. The boys were lying. And the Prince is angry.'

Cassalina looked questioningly at Gerald. He and his friends exchanged horrified glances.

TO BE CONTINUED



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THE BOOK OF GHOSTS by Sabine Baring Gould

The Red-Haired Girl: A Wife's Story

In 1876 we took a house in one of the best streets and parts of B——. I do not give the name of the street or the number of the house, because the circumstances that occurred in that place were such as to make people nervous, and shy—unreasonably so—of taking those lodgings, after reading our experiences therein.

We were a small family—my husband, a grown-up daughter, and myself; and we had two maids—a cook, and the other was house- and parlour maid in one. We had not been a fortnight in the house before my daughter said to me one morning: “Mamma, I do not like Jane”—that was our house-parlourmaid.

“Why so?” I asked. “She seems respectable, and she does her work systematically. I have no fault to find with her, none whatever.”

“She may do her work,” said Bessie, my daughter, “but I dislike inquisitiveness.”

“Inquisitiveness!” I exclaimed. “What do you mean? Has she been looking into your drawers?”

“No, mamma, but she watches me. It is hot weather now, and when I am in my room, occasionally, I leave my door open whilst writing a letter, or doing any little bit of needlework, and then I am almost certain to hear her outside. If I turn sharply round, I see her slipping out of sight. It is most annoying. I really was unaware that I was such an interesting personage as to make it worth anyone's while to spy out my proceedings.”

“Nonsense, my dear. You are sure it is Jane?”

“Well—I suppose so.” There was a slight hesitation in her voice. “If not Jane, who can it be?”

“Are you sure it is not cook?”

“Oh, no, it is not cook; she is busy in the kitchen. I have heard her there, when I have gone outside my room upon the landing, after having caught that girl watching me.”

“If you have caught her,” said I, “I suppose you spoke to her about the impropriety of her conduct.”

“Well, caught is the wrong word. I have not actually caught her at it. Only to-day I distinctly heard her at my door, and I saw her back as she turned to run away, when I went towards her.”

“But you followed her, of course?”

“Yes, but I did not find her on the landing when I got outside.”

“Where was she, then?”

“I don’t know.”

“But did you not go and see?”

“She slipped away with astonishing celerity,” said Bessie.

“I can take no steps in the matter. If she does it again, speak to her and remonstrate.”

“But I never have a chance. She is gone in a moment.”

“She cannot get away so quickly as all that.”

“Somehow she does.”

“And you are sure it is Jane?” again I asked; and again she replied: “If not Jane, who else can it be? There is no one else in the house.”

So this unpleasant matter ended, for the time. The next intimation of something of the sort proceeded from another quarter—in fact, from Jane herself. She came to me some days later and said, with some embarrassment in her tone—

“If you please, ma’am, if I do not give satisfaction, I would rather leave the situation.”

“Leave!” I exclaimed. “Why, I have not given you the slightest cause. I have not found fault with you for anything as yet, have I, Jane? On the contrary, I have been much pleased with the thoroughness of your work. And you are always tidy and obliging.”

“It isn’t that, ma’am; but I don’t like being watched whatever I do.”

“Watched!” I repeated. “What do you mean? You surely do not suppose that I am running after you when you are engaged on your occupations. I assure you I have other and more important things to do.”

“No, ma’am, I don’t suppose you do.”

“Then who watches you?”

“I think it must be Miss Bessie.”

“Miss Bessie!” I could say no more, I was so astounded.

“Yes, ma’am. When I am sweeping out a room, and my back is turned, I hear her at the door; and when I turn myself about, I just catch a glimpse of her running away. I see her skirts——”

“Miss Bessie is above doing anything of the sort.”

“If it is not Miss Bessie, who is it, ma’am?”

There was a tone of indecision in her voice.

“My good Jane,” said I, “set your mind at rest. Miss Bessie could not act as you suppose. Have you seen her on these occasions and assured yourself that it is she?”

“No, ma’am, I’ve not, so to speak, seen her face; but I know it ain’t cook, and I’m sure it ain’t you, ma’am; so who else can it be?”

I considered for some moments, and the maid stood before me in dubious mood.

“You say you saw her skirts. Did you recognise the gown? What did she wear?”

“It was a light cotton print—more like a maid’s morning dress.”

“Well, set your mind at ease; Miss Bessie has not got such a frock as you describe.”

“I don’t think she has,” said Jane; “but there was someone at the door, watching me, who ran away when I turned myself about.”

“Did she run upstairs or down?”

“I don’t know. I did go out on the landing, but there was no one there. I’m sure it wasn’t cook, for I heard her clattering the dishes down in the kitchen at the time.”

“Well, Jane, there is some mystery in this. I will not accept your notice; we will let matters stand over till we can look into this complaint of yours and discover the rights of it.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I’m very comfortable here, but it is unpleasant to suppose that one is not trusted, and is spied on wherever one goes and whatever one is about.”

A week later, after dinner one evening, when Bessie and I had quitted the table and left my husband to his smoke, Bessie said to me, when we were in the drawing-room together: “Mamma, it is not Jane.”

“What is not Jane?” I asked.

“It is not Jane who watches me.”

“Who can it be, then?”

“I don’t know.”

“And how is it that you are confident that you are not being observed by Jane?”

“Because I have seen her—that is to say, her head.”

“When? where?”

“Whilst dressing for dinner, I was before the glass doing my hair, when I saw in the mirror someone behind me. I had only the two candles lighted on the table, and the room was otherwise

dark. I thought I heard someone stirring—just the sort of stealthy step I have come to recognise as having troubled me so often. I did not turn, but looked steadily before me into the glass, and I could see reflected therein someone—a woman with red hair. Then I moved from my place quickly. I heard steps of some person hurrying away, but I saw no one then.”

“The door was open?”

“No, it was shut.”

“But where did she go?”

“I do not know, mamma. I looked everywhere in the room and could find no one. I have been quite upset. I cannot tell what to think of this. I feel utterly unhinged.”

“I noticed at table that you did not appear well, but I said nothing about it. Your father gets so alarmed, and fidgets and fusses, if he thinks that there is anything the matter with you. But this is a most extraordinary story.”

“It is an extraordinary fact,” said Bessie.

“You have searched your room thoroughly?”

“I have looked into every corner.”

“And there is no one there?”

“No one. Would you mind, mamma, sleeping with me to-night? I am so frightened. Do you think it can be a ghost?”

“Ghost? Fiddlesticks!”

I made some excuse to my husband and spent the night in Bessie’s room. There was no disturbance that night of any sort, and although my daughter was excited and unable to sleep till long after midnight, she did fall into refreshing slumber at last, and in the morning said to me: “Mamma, I think I must have fancied that I saw something in the glass. I dare say my nerves were over-wrought.”

I was greatly relieved to hear this, and I arrived at much the same conclusion as did Bessie, but was again bewildered, and my mind unsettled by Jane, who came to me just before lunch, when I was alone, and said—

“Please, ma’am, it’s only fair to say, but it’s not Miss Bessie.”

“What is not Miss Bessie? I mean, who is not Miss Bessie?”

“Her as is spying on me.”

“I told you it could not be she. Who is it?”

“Please, ma’am, I don’t know. It’s a red-haired girl.”

“But, Jane, be serious. There is no red-haired girl in the house.”

“I know there ain’t, ma’am. But for all that, she spies on me.”

“Be reasonable, Jane,” I said, disguising the shock her words produced on me. “If there be no red-haired girl in the house, how can you have one watching you?”

“I don’t know; but one does.”

“How do you know that she is red-haired?”

“Because I have seen her.”

“When?”

“This morning.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes, ma’am. I was going upstairs, when I heard steps coming softly after me—the backstairs, ma’am; they’re rather dark and steep, and there’s no carpet on them, as on the front stairs, and I was sure I heard someone following me; so I twisted about, thinking it might be cook, but it

wasn't. I saw a young woman in a print dress, and the light as came from the window at the side fell on her head, and it was carrots—reg'lar carrots.”

“Did you see her face?”

“No, ma'am; she put her arm up and turned and ran downstairs, and I went after her, but I never found her.”

“You followed her—how far?”

“To the kitchen. Cook was there. And I said to cook, says I: ‘Did you see a girl come this way?’ And she said, short-like: ‘No.’”

“And cook saw nothing at all?”

“Nothing. She didn't seem best pleased at my axing. I suppose I frightened her, as I'd been telling her about how I was followed and spied on.”

I mused a moment only, and then said solemnly—

“Jane, what you want is a pill. You are suffering from hallucinations. I know a case very much like yours; and take my word for it that, in your condition of liver or digestion, a pill is a sovereign remedy. Set your mind at rest; this is a mere delusion, caused by pressure on the optic nerve. I will give you a pill to-night when you go to bed, another to-morrow, a third on the day after, and that will settle the red-haired girl. You will see no more of her.”

“You think so, ma'am?”

“I am sure of it.”

On consideration, I thought it as well to mention the matter to the cook, a strange, reserved woman, not given to talking, who did her work admirably, but whom, for some inexplicable reason, I did not like. If I had considered a little further as to how to broach the subject, I should perhaps have proved more successful; but by not doing so I rushed the question and obtained no satisfaction.

I had gone down to the kitchen to order dinner, and the difficult question had arisen how to dispose of the scraps from yesterday's joint.

“Rissoles, ma’am?”

“No,” said I, “not rissoles. Your master objects to them.”

“Then perhaps croquettes?”

“They are only rissoles in disguise.”

“Perhaps cottage pie?”

“No; that is inorganic rissole, a sort of protoplasm out of which rissoles are developed.”

“Then, ma’am, I might make a hash.”

“Not an ordinary, barefaced, rudimentary hash?”

“No, ma’am, with French mushrooms, or truffles, or tomatoes.”

“Well—yes—perhaps. By the way, talking of tomatoes, who is that red-haired girl who has been about the house?”

“Can’t say, ma’am.”

I noticed at once that the eyes of the cook contracted, her lips tightened, and her face assumed a half-defiant, half-terrified look.

“You have not many friends in this place, have you, cook?”

“No, ma’am, none.”

“Then who can she be?”

“Can’t say, ma’am.”

“You can throw no light on the matter? It is very unsatisfactory having a person about the house—and she has been seen upstairs—of whom one knows nothing.”

“No doubt, ma’am.”

“And you cannot enlighten me?”

“She is no friend of mine.”

“Nor is she of Jane’s. Jane spoke to me about her. Has she remarked concerning this girl to you?”

“Can’t say, ma’am, as I notice all Jane says. She talks a good deal.”

“You see, there must be someone who is a stranger and who has access to this house. It is most awkward.”

“Very so, ma’am.”

I could get nothing more from the cook. I might as well have talked to a log; and, indeed, her face assumed a wooden look as I continued to speak to her on the matter. So I sighed, and said—

“Very well, hash with tomato,” and went upstairs.

A few days later the house-parlourmaid said to me, “Please, ma’am, may I have another pill?”

“Pill!” I exclaimed. “Why?”

“Because I have seen her again. She was behind the curtains, and I caught her putting out her red head to look at me.”

“Did you see her face?”

“No; she up with her arm over it and scuttled away.”

“This is strange. I do not think I have more than two podophyllin pills left in the box, but to those you are welcome. Only I should recommend a different treatment. Instead of taking them yourself, the moment you see, or fancy that you see, the red-haired girl, go at her with the box and threaten to administer the pills to her. That will rout her, if anything will.”

“But she will not stop for the pills.”

“The threat of having them forced on her every time she shows herself will disconcert her. Conceive, I am supposing, that on each occasion Miss Bessie, or I, were to meet you on the stairs, in a room, on the landing, in the hall, we were to rush on you and force, let us say, castor-oil globules between your lips. You would give notice at once.”

“Yes; so I should, ma’am.”

“Well, try this upon the red-haired girl. It will prove infallible.”

“Thank you, ma’am; what you say seems reasonable.”

Whether Bessie saw more of the puzzling apparition, I cannot say. She spoke no further on the matter to me; but that may have been so as to cause me no further uneasiness. I was unable to resolve the question to my own satisfaction—whether what had been seen was a real person, who obtained access to the house in some unaccountable manner, or whether it was, what I have called it, an apparition.

As far as I could ascertain, nothing had been taken away. The movements of the red-haired girl were not those of one who sought to pilfer. They seemed to me rather those of one not in her right mind; and on this supposition I made inquiries in the neighbourhood as to the existence in our street, in any of the adjoining houses, of a person wanting in her wits, who was suffered to run about at will. But I could obtain no information that at all threw light on a point to me so perplexing.

Hitherto I had not mentioned the topic to my husband. I knew so well that I should obtain no help from him, that I made no effort to seek it. He would “Pish!” and “Pshaw!” and make some slighting reference to women’s intellects, and not further trouble himself about the matter.

But one day, to my great astonishment, he referred to it himself.

“Julia,” said he, “do you observe how I have cut myself in shaving?”

“Yes, dear,” I replied. “You have cotton-wool sticking to your jaw, as if you were growing a white whisker on one side.”

“It bled a great deal,” said he.

“I am sorry to hear it.”

“And I mopped up the blood with the new toilet-cover.”

“Never!” I exclaimed. “You haven’t been so foolish as to do that?”

“Yes. And that is just like you. You are much more concerned about your toilet-cover being stained than about my poor cheek which is gashed.”

“You were very clumsy to do it,” was all I could say. Married people are not always careful to preserve the amenities in private life. It is a pity, but it is so.

“It was due to no clumsiness on my part,” said he; “though I do allow my nerves have been so shaken, broken, by married life, that I cannot always command my hand, as was the case when I was a bachelor. But this time it was due to that new, stupid, red-haired servant you have introduced into the house without consulting me or my pocket.”

“Red-haired servant!” I echoed.

“Yes, that red-haired girl I have seen about. She thrusts herself into my study in a most offensive and objectionable way. But the climax of all was this morning, when I was shaving. I stood in my shirt before the glass, and had lathered my face, and was engaged on my right jaw, when that red-haired girl rushed between me and the mirror with both her elbows up, screening her face with her arms, and her head bowed. I started back, and in so doing cut myself.”

“Where did she come from?”

“How can I tell? I did not expect to see anyone.”

“Then where did she go?”

“I do not know; I was too concerned about my bleeding jaw to look about me. That girl must be dismissed.”

“I wish she could be dismissed,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

I did not answer my husband, for I really did not know what answer to make.

I was now the only person in the house who had not seen the red-haired girl, except possibly the cook, from whom I could gather nothing, but whom I suspected of knowing more concerning this mysterious apparition than she chose to admit. That what had been seen by Bessie and Jane was a supernatural visitant, I now felt convinced, seeing that it had appeared to that least imaginative and most commonplace of all individuals, my husband. By no mental process could he have been got to imagine anything. He certainly did see this red-haired girl, and that no living, corporeal maid had been in his dressing-room at the time I was perfectly certain.

I was soon, however, myself to be included in the number of those before whose eyes she appeared. It was in this wise.

Cook had gone out to do some marketing. I was in the breakfast-room, when, wanting a funnel to fill a little phial of brandy I always keep on the washstand in case of emergencies, I went to the head of the kitchen stairs, to descend and fetch what I required. Then I was aware of a great clattering of the fire-irons below, and a banging about of the boiler and grate. I went down the steps very hastily and entered the kitchen.

There I saw a figure of a short, set girl in a shabby cotton gown, not over clean, and slipshod, stooping before the stove, and striking the fender with the iron poker. She had fiery red hair, very untidy.

I uttered an exclamation.

Instantly she dropped the poker, and covering her face with her arms, uttering a strange, low cry, she dashed round the kitchen table, making nearly the complete circuit, and then swept past me, and I heard her clattering up the kitchen stairs.

I was too much taken aback to follow. I stood as one petrified. I felt dazed and unable to trust either my eyes or my ears.

Something like a minute must have elapsed before I had sufficiently recovered to turn and leave the kitchen. Then I ascended slowly and, I confess, nervously. I was fearful lest I should find the red-haired girl cowering against the wall, and that I should have to pass her.

But nothing was to be seen. I reached the hall, and saw that no door was open from it except that of the breakfast-room. I entered and thoroughly examined every recess, corner, and conceivable hiding-place, but could find no one there. Then I ascended the staircase, with my hand on the balustrade, and searched all the rooms on the first floor, without the least success. Above were the servants' apartments, and I now resolved on mounting to them. Here the staircase was uncarpeted. As I was ascending, I heard Jane at work in her room. I then heard her come out hastily upon the landing. At the same moment, with a rush past me, uttering the same moan, went the red-haired girl. I am sure I felt her skirts sweep my dress. I did not notice her till she was close upon me, but I did distinctly see her as she passed. I turned, and saw no more.

I at once mounted to the landing where was Jane.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Please, ma’am, I’ve seen the red-haired girl again, and I did as you recommended. I went at her rattling the pill-box, and she turned and ran downstairs. Did you see her, ma’am, as you came up?”

“How inexplicable!” I said. I would not admit to Jane that I had seen the apparition.

The situation remained unaltered for a week. The mystery was unsolved. No fresh light had been thrown on it. I did not again see or hear anything out of the way; nor did my husband, I presume, for he made no further remarks relative to the extra servant who had caused him so much annoyance. I presume he supposed that I had summarily dismissed her. This I conjectured from a smugness assumed by his face, such as it always acquired when he had carried a point against me—which was not often.

However, one evening, abruptly, we had a new sensation. My husband, Bessie, and I were at dinner, and we were partaking of the soup, Jane standing by, waiting to change our plates and to remove the tureen, when we dropped our spoons, alarmed by fearful screams issuing from the kitchen. By the way, characteristically, my husband finished his soup before he laid down the spoon and said—

“Good gracious! What is that?”

Bessie, Jane, and I were by this time at the door, and we rushed together to the kitchen stairs, and one after the other ran down them. I was the first to enter, and I saw cook wrapped in flames, and a paraffin lamp on the floor broken, and the blazing oil flowing over it.

I had sufficient presence of mind to catch up the cocoanut matting which was not impregnated with the oil, and to throw it round cook, wrap her tightly in it, and force her down on the floor where not overflowed by the oil. I held her thus, and Bessie succoured me. Jane was too frightened to do other than scream. The cries of the burnt woman were terrible. Presently my husband appeared.

“Dear me! Bless me! Good gracious!” he said.

“You go away and fetch a doctor,” I called to him; “you can be of no possible service here—you only get in our way.”

“But the dinner?”

“Bother the dinner! Run for a surgeon.”

In a little while we had removed the poor woman to her room, she shrieking the whole way upstairs; and, when there, we laid her on the bed, and kept her folded in the cocoanut matting till a medical man arrived, in spite of her struggles to be free. My husband, on this occasion, acted with commendable promptness; but whether because he was impatient for the completion of his meal, or whether his sluggish nature was for once touched with human sympathy, it is not for me to say.

All I know is that, so soon as the surgeon was there, I dismissed Jane with “There, go and get your master the rest of his dinner, and leave us with cook.”

The poor creature was frightfully burnt. She was attended to devotedly by Bessie and myself, till a nurse was obtained from the hospital. For hours she was as one mad with terror as much as with pain.

Next day she was quieter and sent for me. I hastened to her, and she begged the nurse to leave the room. I took a chair and seated myself by her bedside, and expressed my profound commiseration, and told her that I should like to know how the accident had taken place.

“Ma’am, it was the red-haired girl did it.”

“The red-haired girl!”

“Yes, ma’am. I took a lamp to look how the fish was getting on, and all at once I saw her rush straight at me, and I—I backed, thinking she would knock me down, and the lamp fell over and smashed, and my clothes caught, and——”

“Oh, cook! you should not have taken the lamp.”

“It’s done. And she would never leave me alone till she had burnt or scalded me. You needn’t be afraid—she don’t haunt the house. It is me she has haunted, because of what I did to her.”

“Then you know her?”

“She was in service with me, as kitchen maid, at my last place, near Cambridge. I took a sort of hate against her, she was such a slattern and so inquisitive. She peeped into my letters, and turned out my box and drawers, she was ever prying; and when I spoke to her, she was that saucy! I reg’lar hated her. And one day she was kneeling by the stove, and I was there, too, and I suppose the devil possessed me, for I upset the boiler as was on the hot-plate right upon her, just as she looked up, and it poured over her face and bosom, and arms, and scalded her that dreadful, she died. And since then she has haunted me. But she’ll do so no more. She won’t trouble you further. She has done for me, as she has always minded to do, since I scalded her to death.”

The unhappy woman did not recover.

“Dear me! no hope?” said my husband, when informed that the surgeon despaired of her. “And good cooks are so scarce. By the way, that red-haired girl?”

“Gone—gone for ever,” I said.

THE END

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Four

Story Talbot had much on his mind as he hurried from the Space Port where he had just returned from Callisto Base 2. He was now on his way to Tower 4B, at Callisto Base 1. Work on rebuilding the base was moving at a good pace. Every block was filled with work parties digging through the ruins for salvage. Not a single brick nor even a broken piece of glass of the domed colony would be thrown out. Every piece would be saved for later use.

Informally called the West Tower, Tower 4B was the only tower left standing at Callisto Base 1 after the Battle for Callisto. Standing nearly 80 feet above the streets, it was also, even before the battle, one of the tallest towers anywhere in the Solar System outside Earth.

From the widows of the uppers floors, it gave a wide view of the rusted purple-brown ice deserts surrounding the colony, and of Jupiter itself. From Callisto, it appeared roughly the size of a baseball. And, of course, the tower gave a very clear view of Callisto Base 1 itself. From the highest floors it was possible to gauge the daily progress as the colony was being rebuilt after the disastrous battle.

For all these reasons, the West Tower, especially with its expansive Grissom Room, was well-suited for the meeting to which Talbot was then hurrying.

He was very nearly late. And though he was a man in his seventies, as measured by Earth years, he prided himself on always being prompt.

He almost late for this meeting, because he was just then returning from Callisto Base 2, where his daughter, Emily, lay in a coma in the hospital there, one of the few hospitals to almost miraculously survive Turhan Mot's savage attack. He left his wife, Joyce, with Emily, while his son Jeffrey, was working his sixteen-hour shift, working on the repairs of Callisto Base 1.

They all took turns staying with Emily. Never once did they leave their beloved daughter and sister alone. Joyce spent nearly every waking minute at the hospital, while Story and Jeffrey took turns keeping her company and giving her the chance to catching a few hours of badly needed sleep, a shower, and a change of clothing.

"Good to see you, Story," Colonel Bridgemont said to his old friend as he stepped into the Grissom Room. He and Colonel Westland, Chief of Security on the "Bellerophon" and Doctor Maxwell, current Administrator of the Jovian colonies, sat at a large U-shaped mahogany table that gave every person sitting at it a clear view of the expansive windows that opened through the entire circular wall.

Jupiter gleamed on the horizon, its massive gases roiling and boiling, and its Great Red Spot moving majestically along its southern hemispheres. In better times, the floor in which the Grissom Room had been built rotated on a central axis. But that was an extravagance the colony could no longer afford, not after the battle.

“And you, Gerald. As always,” Talbot replied.

“How is Emily?” Colonel Westland asked.

Talbot slowly shook his head.

“Sadly, there has been no change.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that, Story,” Colonel Westland said.

Westland offered no empty platitudes, nor any hopeless promises that Emily would get better, against all possibilities. Story Talbot appreciated that.

“Thank you, Franklin,” Talbot replied, offering his friend a sad smile.

“This must be very difficult for your wife,” Doctor Maxwell said.

“She is strong, doctor, and has been put through much, but yes. This is truly wearing her down.”

“Do give her my kindest regards,” Doctor Maxwell said.

“That I shall surely do,” Talbot replied, sitting himself at the table near Colonel Bridgemont. He removed a small handheld device from a pocket and laid it on the table. With a motion of his hand, he caused it to open and spread outward, like a series of papers. This was his digital notebook and briefcase, packaged together.

Of the four men in the room, Doctor Maxwell, appointed Administrator of the Jovian colonies for a term, was the only one who had no knowledge whatever of Story Talbot’s background, or who he truly was.

Maxwell had not the least glimmering that until he had arrived at Callisto some months before the battle, Story Talbot had been Frederick Jervis Sherman, III, Civilian Liaison for General Howe, Commander of Earth Space Forces.

Doctor Maxwell, an astronomer, and a man of some sophistication, knew to take Talbot as the man was presented to him, an independent researcher, late from Mars, and an old and very close friend of Colonel Bridgemont. He asked no questions of the man, or of his connections to Bridgemont, but simply accepted Story Talbot and his family as they were insinuated into the community of Callisto.

Maxwell had no interest in his role as administrator. He was appointed to the position by a random lottery, as all administrators of the colonies of Jupiter were. His interest was in the outer rings of Jupiter. It was for this reason, to study the rings, that he had come to Jupiter. The responsibilities of administrator only took him away from his interest, and his only reason for putting up with the annoyances of living on Callisto.

Maxwell's ambitions extended no further than to study the cosmos, specializing particularly on the endlessly fascinating subject of planetary ring systems. He had no interest in power for its own sake, nor for power over others. He was, like most Callistoan administrators before him, content to live his own life of study, and to allow others to live themselves as they pleased.

Which is precisely what made him such an attractive candidate for administrator at Callisto. The system of rotating administrators had been established very early in the history of the colony, and the other colonies of the moons orbiting Jupiter, particularly with the intent to discourage the politically ambitious.

It was a system like every other, in that it had both its virtues and its flaws. Each person stepping into the role knew that in a year or two, the very people to whom he or she was giving orders today would almost certainly be giving orders a year or two later. So any temptation toward excess or an abuse of power was stifled at the very beginning of the administrator's tenure.

But as anyone who has ever been in a position of authority well understands, sometimes unpopular or unpleasant commands must be given, and the system that discouraged abuses of power tended also to discourage the unpleasant, but necessary, tasks required to keep a community functioning from being performed. So it happened that many people who performed their duties at something less than an acceptable standard remained at their posts for years, when it was clear to all that they should have been removed or demoted.

Now it would be unfair to say of Maxwell that, though he had no interest in the scheming and the often-Machiavellian manoeuvres required, even in this system which elevated mediocrity to the status of a virtue, he was careless in carrying out those administrative duties to which he had been appointed.

Doctor Maxwell was far too scrupulous a professional to neglect any legitimate responsibility imposed on him, however onerous. But the point of the first part of this meeting, the ongoing rebuilding of Callisto Base 1, and the only matter which concerned Doctor Maxwell, was one he carried out with more than his usual efficiency, his goal being to get this meeting over with as quickly as decently possible, so he could return to his true interests.

A series of visiscreens mounted on the portion of the wall that was not a window onto Jupiter allowed the administrators and the heads of the reconstruction teams of Europa and Ganymede to participate in the meeting.

Rebuilding was moving along as well as anyone could reasonably expect, and Maxwell, not being versed at all in construction, could only listen as the heads of various construction teams gave their reports, and answered the few questions put to them. Each team was given ten minutes to make a presentation, with another five minutes for answering questions. Brevity was strongly encouraged here, and everyone present understood that. So reports on the subject of rebuilding moved along at a good pace.

And after two hours, that business was taken care of.

At the conclusion of that, the first part of the meeting, Colonel Bridgemont rose and gave a brief report regarding the security of Callisto and the other moons of Jupiter. This was a very brief and a very highly edited report, Bridgemont giving out only the information that it was absolutely necessary for the other members of the administrative and reconstruction teams to know.

“Thank you all, gentlemen, and ladies,” Doctor Maxwell said to all, as each had taken a seat after he and she had given their reports. “I think we are done here, and can leave our friends, Colonels Westland and Bridgemont, and Professor Talbot, late of Mars, to carry on their own discussion regarding the directives they have received from Earth, of which they shall apprise us at our next meeting two hundred hours from now.

Everyone in the room filed out. In a few short minutes, Talbot, Westland and Bridgemont were left alone.

Bridgemont, Chief of Jovian Security, quietly leaned under the large U-shaped table and shut down the recording system in the room.

“Gentlemen,” he said. “We are now free to speak freely.”

Colonel Westland walked over to the door and locked it.

Returning to his seat at the table, he sat down and said, “Yes. We can discuss our security matters freely now.”

“And where shall we start, gentlemen?” Talbot asked.

“We have several matters before us,” Colonel Westland began. “So let me begin with our reports from Captain Hardy.”

“Quite right,” Story Talbot replied. “And what do we hear from our young friend?”

“We learn through him that Carter Ward is still on the trail of Turhan Mot, through the outer asteroids.”

“Any progress on that front?” Talbot asked.

“Apparently not,” Westland answered. “However, we do seem to have some leads on this ‘Astra Palace’.”

“Yes?” Talbot asked.

“Indeed. Ward’s friend, Mud, has questioned a number of people as he continues his search for Carter. One, a prostitute who calls herself Lacey, has had a number of contacts with these Scroungers, several of whom have attempted to talk her into going to Astra Palace. Apparently her skills are of the kind much appreciated there.”

“Is that so?” Bridgemont asked. “This sounds like good news. Has she actually been to this Astra Palace?”

“Two times, apparently,” Westland answered, holding up two fingers.

“Well, gentlemen, this does sound like very good news, indeed. Is there any chance that she could lead any of our people to Astra Palace?” Talbot asked.

“Not very likely,” Westland said. “Her many talents do not include navigation or tracking, unfortunately. But she was able to provide Mud a very thorough and detailed description of the place.”

“Is that so?” Bridgemont asked.

“Indeed so. You’ll find the completest description in Captain Hardy’s report to us, numbered H-001-024. But for now I can confirm that our suspicions have been confirmed through Mud’s source, that Astra Palace is indeed built into an asteroid, one in the outer belt. Apparently the asteroid is large enough to have been catalogued, but which one it may be we have no way of knowing.”

“This is a major step forward for us,” Talbot said, “To be able to confirm this much.”

“There is more, much more,” Westland said, with a smile. “Apparently this Lacey is a veritable font of information.”

“I think much of that might be due to our friend, Mud,” Talbot said. “Though he is very gruff in his manner and his appearance, I have learned of him, when he has been good enough to attend some of our little soirees with Illara and Carter, that his manner hides an otherwise very subtle character. He does have a way of charming the ladies, to use the expression, when he puts his heart into it. I have no doubt that this Lacey, even belonging, as she seems, to a profession that can only encourage the deepest cynicism in most, fell victim to his subtle manipulations.”

Bridgemont and Westland both smiled at Talbot’s characterization of Mud.

“Correct you are, I have no doubt,” Bridgemont said. “As you so often are.”

Talbot waved away the compliment with a smile.

“And what more can you tell us of this Astra Palace?” he asked Westland.

“Without wasting our time here,” Westland began, “I’ll just hit the highlights. The more detailed report you can find in Hardy’s report, which I’ll transfer to your notebooks now.”

Westland looked down at his own notebook and tapped a few keys.

“Done,” he said. “Now, Astra Palace is, as we suspected, and which the name itself suggests, a hideaway of sorts for the Scroungers. It is something in the way of a pleasure palace, as it were, a combination hotel, casino, or rather, a series of hotels, casinos and brothels where weary space pirates can hole up for a time to recharge their batteries.

“In addition to those, are the trading posts, machine shops, and other places of a more functional nature, where our opponents can repair or rebuild their ships. But these, it seems, are rather of a secondary nature. The primary purpose of them seems to be to cater to the pleasures of the Scroungers, while also affording them a place to hide away for a time, from the law itself, as it is manifested on Earth and Mars, or from other Scroungers who may bear a grudge against them.”

“Most interesting,” Talbot said.

“Quite agreed,” Bridgemont concurred. “I will read Hardy’s report with great interest. Have we any specifics?”

“Not many,” Westland admitted. “But the few we do have are of extreme interest, to say nothing of importance.”

“Yes?” Talbot prompted.

“Yes, indeed,” Westland answered, grinning.

“We have the name of the administrator of this place. His name is Horst Dal.”

“Oh!” Talbot exclaimed. “That is good news, very good news, indeed!”

“I’ll say, boy!” Bridgemont agreed, clapping his hands together.

“Yes. Having his name, can the man himself be not far behind?” Westland asked rhetorically, and grinning broadly. “But there is more.”

“More?” Talbot asked. “Riches shower upon us. Our friend, Mud, has done us a great service.”

“And Ward, too,” Westland added. “It’s only because he’s looking out for Ward that Mud has undertaken this little adventure on our behalf.”

“Quite so,” Talbot agreed. “WE all owe him a great deal. I owe him much, very much, and most particularly.”

“Well, then, let us hope that he comes to a happy ending,” Westland said. “As for the rest of it, we learn that this Horst Dal has a confidante, probably his only confidante, a man by the name of Yamir.”

“Yamir?” Bridgemont repeated. “Is that a name I should know?”

“I couldn’t tell you,” Westland replied. “But what I can tell you is that Yamir is one of the men, along with Turhan Mot and that fellow’s second-in-command, Mokem Bet, responsible for the attack against Callisto.”

“Is that indeed so?” Bridgemont demanded.

“Indeed it is,” Westland answered. “So, if you didn’t know his name before, you should surely do so now.”

“Oh, you can bet I won’t be forgetting his name anytime soon,”

“Or ever, I am sure,” Westland answered

“Nope,” Bridgemont agreed.

“This Yamir commands his own ship, has a crew of maybe forty. Probably a Scrounger himself, but we don’t have anything definite on that point. In any case, that’s the highlights coming from this Lacey person. The details, as I’ve already mentioned, you’ll find Hardy’s latest report.”

“Oh, and speaking of this Lacey again,” Talbot asked. “Did she happen to give our friend Mud any indication of why she chose not to remain at Astra Palace? It seems to be a place where a person of her skills should do quite well.”

“Yes,” Westland answered. “Apparently she made it very clear to Mud why she chose not to stay. Not on her first visit there. But on her second. Her mind was quite made up on her second visit.”

“And why was that?” Talbot pressed.

“As I said before, Astra Palace caters to the, uh... tastes of the Scroungers.”

“Yes?”

“And this Lacey is quite willing to indulge many of those tastes, but she found herself unable to bring herself to accommodate some of those tastes.”

“Oh?” Talbot asked.

“Cannibalism,” Westland explained. “The practice seems well entrenched at Astra Palace. That, along with several other, um, one might use the word ‘fetishes’ even more repugnant.”

Silence settled upon the three men for a long and tortured moment.

Finally, stroking his chin with his long and delicate fingers, Talbot spoke.

“It occurs to me, my friends, that sharing all this information with Mud, it may be that Lacey has

put her own safety in doubt. It seems to me that one who is willing to eat his fellow creature might not think twice about killing, to keep that unpleasant predilection a little secret between himself, his meals and those with whom he shares those meals.”

Westland and Bridgemont exchanged glances.

“And this Miss Lacey has been indeed so helpful to us that I would be very upset with myself if she were to come to harm, due to our negligence.”

“What would you have us do?” Westland asked.

“Perhaps we could send a ship to the asteroid, and have them bring this Miss Lacey here, where she would not have to fear being either killed or eaten by us?”

Bridgemont moved his head slowly back and forth.

“I’m sorry, Story. I really am, but we can’t spare anyone on a mission like that. Not now, probably not ever.”

Talbot pursed his lips.

“I rather thought so,” he said after a moment’s reflection. “But I felt the obligation to make the query.”

“I am sorry, Story.”

“I know you are, Gerald, old friend. But perhaps our friend Mud might be persuaded to look in on her, and, perhaps, see if he couldn’t talk her into leaving the place where she is now, for safer climes?”

“That would be up to Mud, himself,” Westland said. “It’ll be hard to take him away from the mission he’s on right now. He’s giving us a helluva lot of good information.”

“Indeed he is,” Talbot agreed.

“And I don’t know if he’d be all that willing to drop what he’s doing now, trailing Ward. But I’ll put the query to him through Hardy.”

“Thank you, Franklin. That’s all I can ask of you.”

“Please be sure, Story, that both Frank and I feel exactly the same way you do,” Bridgemont assured him.

“Oh, I know you do, Gerald. And I am sorry that you feel the need to give me that reassurance. I harbour no doubts regarding your humanity. And I know all too well that you both have had often to make some very cold-blooded decisions, for the sake of preserving the lives of others.”

“It sometimes seems heartless, I know, the things Jerry and I have done...”

“Please,” Talbot said, raising his hand, interrupting Bridgemont. “Say no more. I know you both very well, you and Gerald. And I know that you are both men of great heart as well as great courage. So, please, do not ever feel the need to defend yourselves or any decisions you may ever make to me.”

“Quite right,” Westland said. “Perhaps we should get on to any other orders of business now?”

“Agreed,” Bridgemont said. “My reports from Illara only confirm much of what Hardy told us, except for that coming from this Miss Lacey. All that is new to me, as it is to Talbot. As I discussed at the general meeting earlier, we have had a few Scrounger patrol ships sniffing us out. Ever since the battle, they’ve been nosing around here quite a bit. More than I like. We’ve been keeping the news quiet, as much as we can, and killing the bastards, too, when we can catch them.”

“Good. Very good,” Westland said.

“And we’ve been following those we haven’t been able to kill outright. They don’t come from any one direction, dammit, but several,” Bridgemont said.

“Why ‘dammit’?” Talbot asked.

“If they were coming at us from any particular direction, then we’d be able to guess that there was a headquarters, or a base that these bastards were launching from. No such luck.”

“Ah. Of course,” Talbot replied.

Bridgemont pressed a button on the desk, calling up holographic images culled from the many millions recorded during the battle. Two ships appeared above the desk. One was long and almost needle-like, with a flight deck amidships, and a prominent command deck at the fore. The scale accompanying the image indicated that the ship was roughly a half-mile in length, nearly the size of Westland’s “Bellerophon”. The other ship was built up of twelve bronze-coloured spheres, arranged in a pyramidal shape. It showed no flight deck, but a very heavy armament.

“Gentlemen, what you are seeing are the two transport ships that figured prominently in the attack against us. The one ship, we know from our friends, Carter and Mud, was commanded by Turhan Mot. That ship was destroyed, or very nearly so, in the battle. The other large ship is also a Scrounger ship. We are not sure who commands it, or even so much as its name.

“Now the reason I bring these ships to your attention is to make the point that before the battle, we had no idea that the Scroungers had any ships of this size this far out. And then we were surprised to find that there were two. There might be more.

“The small ships harassing us now strongly indicate the source to be a transport ship. But we

were surprised before, so it might be that there are many more than only one ship, or two. As far as we are able to guess, there may be even half a dozen of those bastards out there.”

“But they have not launched any attacks on us since the battle,” Talbot interjected.

“That’s right, they haven’t,” Bridgemont said.

“Which suggests that they are not ready to attack yet,” Talbot said.

“Yeah,” Bridgemont agreed. “But it also raises the question of `why’? Why are they harassing us? If they’re not ready to attack, why are they letting us know they are here?”

“Keep us on edge,” Colonel Westland put in. “Keep our nerves rattled. Make us lose sleep, wondering what the hell they’re up to. Let us know they haven’t forgotten us,” he wrapped up, with a shrug.

“Mm,” was Talbot’s monosyllabic reply.

“So where does this leave us?” Bridgemont asked of Westland. “The one ship, the one that Ward tells us was commanded by Turhan Mot was very nearly destroyed. It is clearly not in any functional condition now.”

“And the other,” Westland said, gesturing toward the holographic image projected above the mahogany desk, “As we can see, here, it is not fitted out to carry any ships of any size. But it is heavily armed, and, unlike its companion, it escaped the battle relatively unscathed.

“So it appears that there is at least one more large transport out there, and not far off. Perhaps more. We don’t know.”

“I see,” Bridgemont said. Then, turning to Talbot, he asked, “Have we been sharing any of this with our friend back on Earth, General Howe?”

“Even with subspace communications, I hesitate to say too much to Bill. As we all know, he is playing a very dangerous game, and apparently the game has been heating up for him in these last few months, especially now, after the battle.”

“How so?” Westland asked.

“As we all know, Secretary Benson has been very suspicious of everyone who preceded him in office. Even jealous. And Bill has been in his current post for well over twenty years. That, and the fact that he is very well liked by his command, and all who have worked with him, gives Benson two reasons to distrust him already.”

“Yes, that is all very true,” Colonel Westland replied with a sardonic grin. Westland reported directly to General Howe. But as all their communications were closely scrutinized by several layers of bureaucracy and coding, it was necessary for them to sanitize their words to the point

that they were almost completely anodyne. This made their communications useless for any agency that Talbot, Westland or Bridgemont might put them to.

“Our friend, Bill, has been working behind the scenes, as we know, to stymie Secretary’s Benson’s campaign against Mars, and he has been very successful, thus far. Turhan Mot’s attack on us here has proven very beneficial in that regard, as well, for it does force Benson to redirect his attention.”

“Which Bill was quick to exploit,” Westland said.

“Yes. Quite so,” Talbot agreed.

“But I fear the noose is tightening,” he went on to say. “Benson has always been suspicious of General Howe. It appears now that his suspicions are coalescing into real schemes against Howe.”

“Oh?” Westland asked.

“In his most recent communication to me, he cautions me against sending him any more messages. He is being closely watched.”

“This is not good,” Westland said. His mouth formed itself into a scowl.

“He will send me communications when he knows it is safe, but otherwise,” Talbot went on, “It is far too dangerous for him to receive any messages from me.”

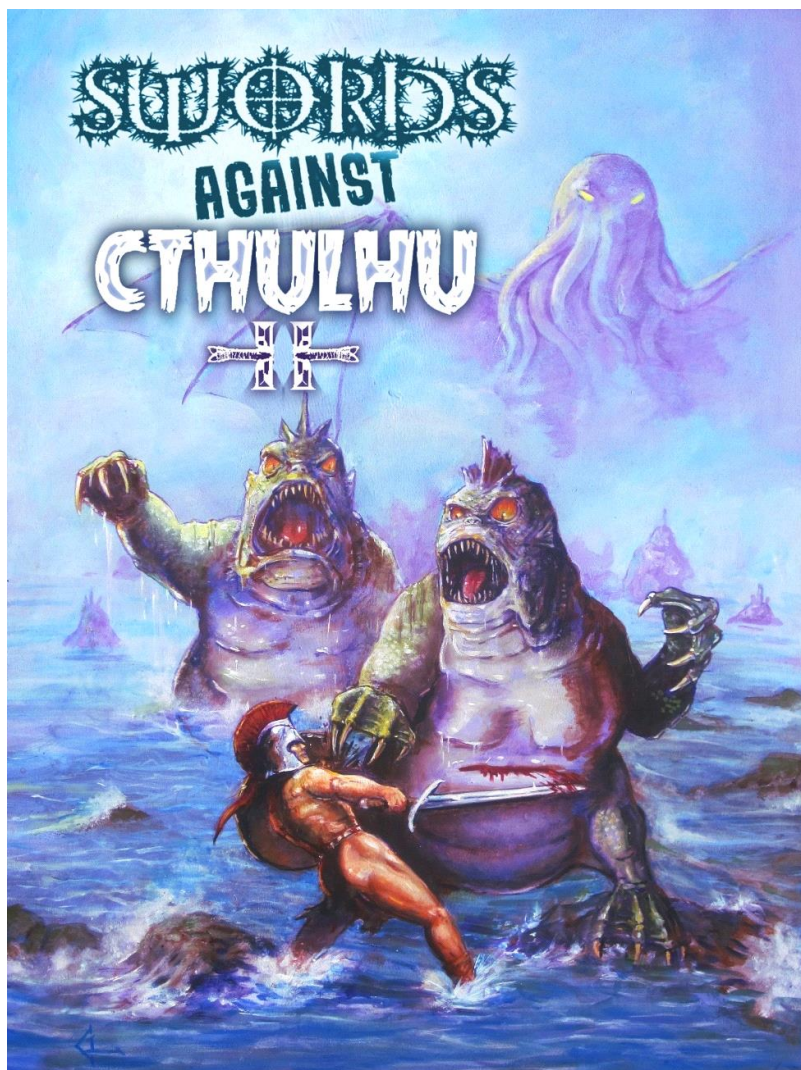
“It seems to me that it would be dangerous for you, as well,” Westland said.

“And for all of us,” Bridgemont added. “If word got back to Benson that you were here on Callisto, I think that Benson would be quick to have you picked up, and the rest of us punished for harbouring you.”

A chill silence settled on the shoulders of all three men.

“Gentlemen,” Talbot finally said. “I fear we have some very dark days ahead.”

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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ACROSS THE ZODIAC by Percy Greg

Chapter X—Woman and Wedlock.

We arrived at home in the course of some few minutes, and here my host requested us to wait in the hall, where in about half-an-hour he rejoined us, accompanied by all the members of his family, the ladies all closely veiled. Looking among them instinctively for Eveena, I observed that she had exchanged her usual light veil for one fuller and denser, and wore, contrary to the wont of maidens indoors, sleeves and gloves. She held her father's hand, and evinced no little agitation or alarm. The visitor stood by a table on which had been placed the usual pencils or styles, and a sort of open portfolio, on one side of which was laid a small strip of the golden tafroo, inscribed with crimson characters of unusual size, leaving several blanks here and there. Most of these he filled up, and then, leading forward his daughter, Esmo signed to me also to approach the table. The others stood just behind us, and the official then placed the document in Eveena's hand. She looked through it and replaced it on the table with the gesture of assent usual among her people, inclining her head and raising her left hand to her lips. The document was then handed to me, but I, of course, was unable to read it. I said so, and the official read it aloud:

“Between Eveena, daughter of Esmo dent Ecasfen, and —— [13] reclamomortâ (the alleged arch-traveller), covenant: Eveena will live with —— in wedlock for two years, foregoing during that period the liberty to quit his house, or to receive any one therein save by his permission. In consideration whereof he will maintain her, clothing her to her satisfaction, at a cost not exceeding five stâltau by the year. He will provide for any child or children she may bear while living with him, or within twice twelve dozen days thereafter. And if at any time he shall dismiss her or permit her to leave him, or if she shall desire to leave him after the expiration of eight years, he will ensure to her for her life an annual payment of fifteen stâltau. Neither shall appeal to a court of law or public authority against the other on account of anything done during the time they shall live together, except for attempt to kill or for grave bodily injury.”

Such is the form of marriage covenant employed in Mars. The occasion was unfit for discussion, and I simply intimated my acceptance of the covenants, to which Eveena and myself forthwith were instructed to write our names where they appear in the above translation. The official then inquired whether I recognised the lady standing beside me as Eveena, daughter of Esmo. It then struck me that, though I felt pretty certain of her identity, marriage under such conditions might occasionally lead to awkward mistakes. There was no such difference between my bride and her companions as, but for her dress and her agitation, would have enabled me positively to distinguish them, veiled and silent as all were. I expressed no doubt, however, and the official then proceeded to affix his own stamp to the document; and then lifting up that on which our names had actually been written, showed that, by some process I hardly understand, the signature had been executed and the agreement filled up in triplicate, the officer preserving one copy, the others being given to the bride and bridegroom respectively. The ladies then retired, Esmo, his son, and the official remaining, when two ambau brought in a tray of refreshments. The official tasted each article offered to him, evidently more as a matter of form than of pleasure. I took this opportunity to ask some questions regarding the Martial cuisine, and learnt that all but the very simplest cookery is performed by professional confectioners, who supply twice a day the

households in their vicinity; unmarried men taking their meals at the shop. The preparation of fruit, roasted grain, beverages consisting of juices mixed with a prepared nectar, and the vegetables from the garden, which enter into the composition of every meal, are the only culinary cares of the ladies of the family. Everything can be warmed or freshened on the stove which forms a part of that electric machinery by which in every household the baths and lights are supplied and the house warmed at night. The ladies have therefore very little household work, and the greater part of this is performed under their superintendence by the animals, which are almost as useful as any human slaves on earth, with the one unquestionable advantage that they cannot speak, and therefore cannot be impertinent, inquisitive, or treacherous. No fermented liquors form part of the Martial diet; but some narcotics resembling haschisch and opium are much relished. When the official had retired, I said to my host—

“I thought it best to raise no question or objection in signing the contract put before me with your sanction; but you must be aware, in the first place, that I have no means here of performing the pecuniary part of the covenant, no means of providing either maintenance or pin-money.”

The explanation of the latter phrase, which was immediately demanded, produced not a little amusement, after which Esmo replied gravely—

“It will be very easy for you, if necessary, to realise a competence in the course of half a year. A book relating your adventures, and describing the world you have left, would bring you in a very comfortable fortune; and you might more than double this by giving addresses in each of our towns, which, if only from the curiosity our people would entertain to see you with their own eyes, would attract crowded audiences. You could get a considerable sum for the exclusive right to take your likeness; and, if you chose to explain it, you might fix your own price on the novel motive power you have introduced. But there is another point in regard to the contract which you have overlooked, but which I was bound to bear in mind. What you have promised is, I believe, what Eveena would have obtained from any suitor she was likely to accept. But since you left the matter entirely to my discretion, I am bound to make it impossible that you should be a loser; and this document (and he handed me a small slip very much like that which contained the marriage covenant) imposes on my estate the payment of an income for Eveena’s life equal to that you have promised her.”

With much reluctance I found myself obliged to accept a dowry which, however natural and proper on Earth, was, I felt, unusual in Mars. I may say that such charges do not interfere with the free sale of land. They are registered in the proper office, and the State trustee collects them from the owner for the time being as quit-rents are collected in Great Britain or land revenue in India. Turning to another but kindred question, I said—

“Your marriage contract, like our own laws, appears to favour the weaker sex more than strict theoretical equality would permit. This is quite right and practically inevitable; but it hardly agrees with the theory which supposes bride and bridegroom, husband and wife, to enter on and maintain a coequal voluntary partnership.”

“How so?” he inquired.

“The right of divorce,” I said, “at the end of two years belongs to the wife alone. The husband cannot divorce her except under a heavy penalty.”

“Observe,” he answered, “that there is a grave practical inequality which even theory can hardly ignore. The wife parts with something by the very fact of marriage. At the end of two years, when she has borne two, three, or four children, her value in marriage is greatly lessened. Her capacity of maintaining herself, in the days when women did work, was found practically to be even smaller than before marriage. You may say that this really amounts to a recognition by custom of the natural inequality denied by law; but at any rate, it is an inequality which it was scarcely possible to overlook. Examine the practical working of the covenants, and you will find that in affecting to treat unequals as equals they merely make the weaker the slave of the stronger.”

“Surely,” I said, “husband and wife are so far equal, where neither is tied to the children, that each can make the other heartily glad to assent to a divorce.”

“Perhaps, where law interferes to enforce monogamy, and thereby to create an artificial equality of mutual dependence. But our law cannot dictate to equals, whose sex it ignores, the terms or numbers of partnership. So, the terms of the contract being voluntary, men of course insist on excluding legal interference in household quarrels; and before the prohibitive clause was generally adopted, legal interposition did more harm than good. As you will find, equality before the law gives absolute effect to the real inequality, and chiefly through its coarsest element, superior physical force. The liberty that is a necessary logical consequence of equality takes from the woman her one natural safeguard—the man’s need of her goodwill, if not of her affection.”

“In our world,” I replied, “I always held that even slaves, so they be household slaves, are secure against gross cruelty. The owner cannot make life a burden to them without imperilling his own. To reduce the question to its lowest terms—malice will always be a match for muscle, and poison an efficient antidote to the ferula.”

“So,” rejoined Esmo, “our men have perceived, and consequently they have excepted attempts to murder, as the women have excepted serious bodily injury, from the general rule prohibiting appeals to a court of law.”

“And,” said I, “are there many such appeals?”

“Not one in two years,” he replied; “and for a simple reason. Our law, as matter of course and of common sense, puts murder, attempted or accomplished, on the same footing, and visits both with its supreme penalty. Consequently, a wife detected in such an attempt is at her husband’s mercy; and if he consent to spare her life, she must submit to any infliction, however it may transgress the covenanted limit. In fact, if he find her out in such an attempt, he may do anything but put her to death on his own authority.”

“Still,” I answered, “as long as she remains in the house, she must have frequent opportunity of repeating her attempt at revenge; and to live in constant fear of assassination would break down the strongest nerves.”

“Our physicians,” he said, “are more skilful in antidotes than our women in poisons, even when the latter have learned chemistry. No poisonous plants are grown near our houses; and as wives never go out alone, they have little chance of getting hold of any fatal drug. I believe that very few attempts to poison are successful, and that many women have suffered very severely on mere suspicion.”

“And what,” I asked, “is the legal definition of ‘grave bodily injury’?”

“Injury,” he said, “of which serious traces remain at the end of twenty-four days; the destruction of a limb, or the deprivation, partial or total, of a sense. I have often thought bitterly,” he continued, “of that boasted logic and liberality of our laws under which my daughters might have to endure almost any maltreatment from their husbands, so long as these have but the sense not to employ weapons that leave almost ineffaceable marks. This is one main reason why we so anxiously avoid giving them save to those who are bound by the ties of our faith to treat them as kindly as children—for whom, at the worst, they remain sisters of the Order. If women generally had parents, our marriage law could never have carried out the fiction of equality to its logical perfection and practical monstrosity.”

“Equality, then, has given your women a harder life and a worse position than that of those women in our world who are, not only by law but by fact and custom, the slaves of their husbands?”

“Yes, indeed,” he said; “and our proverbs, though made by men, express this truth with a sharpness in which there is little exaggeration. Our school textbooks tell us that action and reaction are equal and opposite; and this familiar phrase gives meaning to the saw, *Pelmavè dakâl dakè*, ‘She is equal, the thing struck to the hammer,’ meaning that woman’s equality to man is no more effective than the reaction of the leather on the mallet. ‘Bitterer smiles of twelve than tears of ten’ (referring to the age of marriage). *Thleen delkint treen lalfe zevleen*, ‘Twixt fogs and clouds she dreams of stars.’”

“What does that mean?”

“Would you not render it in the terminology of the hymn you translated for us, ‘Between Purgatory and Hell, one dream of Heaven?’ Still puzzled? ‘Between the harshness of school and the misery of marriage, the illusions of the bride.’ Again, *Zefoo zevleel, zave marneel, clafte cratheneel*, ‘A child [cries] for the stars, a maiden for the matron’s dress, a woman for her shroud.’”

“Do you mean to say that that is not exaggerated?”

“I suppose it is, as women are even less given to suicide than men. That is perhaps the ugliest proverb of its kind. I will only quote one more, and that is two-edged—

“‘Fool he who heeds a woman’s tears, to woman’s tongue replies;

Fool she who braves man's hand—but when was man or woman wise?"

Here Zulte came to the door and made a sign to her husband. Waiting courteously to ascertain that I had finished speaking, and until his son had somewhat ceremoniously taken leave of me, he led me to the door of a chamber next to that I had hitherto occupied. Pausing here himself, he motioned me to go on, and the door parting, I found myself in a room I had not before entered, about the same size as my own and similarly furnished, but differently coloured, now communicating with it by a door which I knew had not previously existed. Here were Eveena's mother and sister, dressed as usual.

Eveena herself had exchanged her maiden white for the light pink of a young matron, but was closely veiled in a similar material. Her mother and sister kissed her with much emotion, though without the tears and lamentations, real or affected, with which—alike among the nomads of Asia and the most cultivated races of Europe—even those relatives who have striven hardest to marry a daughter or sister think it necessary to celebrate the fulfilment of their hopes, and the termination of their often prolonged and wearisome labours. I was then left alone with my bride, who remained half-seated, half-crouching on the cushions in a corner of the room. I could not help feeling keenly how much a marriage so unceremonious and with so little previous acquaintance, or rather so great a reserve and distance in our former intercourse, intensified the awkwardness many a man on Earth feels when first left alone with the partner of his future life. But a single glance at the small drooping figure half-hidden in the cushions brought the reflection that a situation, embarrassing to the bridegroom, must be in the last degree alarming and distressing to the bride. But for her visit to the Astronaut we should have been almost strangers; I could hardly have recognised even her voice. I must, however, speak; and naturally my first sentence was a half-articulate request that she would remove her veil.

"No," she whispered, rising, "you must do that."

Taking off the glove of her left hand, she came up to me shyly and slowly, and placed it in my right—a not unmeaning ceremony. Having obeyed her instruction, my lips touched for the first time the brow of my young wife. That she was more than shy and startled, was even painfully agitated and frightened, became instantly apparent now that her countenance was visible. What must be the state of Martial brides in general, when the signature of the contract immediately places them at the disposal of an utter stranger, it was beyond the power of my imagination to conceive, if their feelings were at all to be measured by Eveena's under conditions sufficiently trying, but certainly far better than theirs. Nothing was so likely to quiet her as perfect calmness on my side; and, though with a heart beating almost as fast as her own, if with very different emotions, I led her gently back to her place, and resting on a cushion just out of reach, began to talk to her. Choosing as the easiest subject our adventure of yesterday, I asked what could have induced her to place herself in a situation so dangerous.

"Do not be angry with me now," she pleaded. "I am exceedingly fond of flowers; they have been my only amusement except the training of my pets. You can see how little women have to do, how little occupation or interest is permitted us. The rearing of rare flowers, or the creation of new ones, is almost the only employment in which we can find exercise for such intelligence as we possess. I had never seen before the flower that grew on that shelf. I believe, indeed, that it

only grows on a few of our higher mountains below the snow-line, and I was anxious to bring it home and see what could be made of it in the garden. I thought it might be developed into something almost as beautiful as that bright leenoo you admired so greatly in my flower-bed."

"But," said I, "the two flowers are not of the same shape or colour; and, though I am not learned in botany, I should say hardly belong to the same family."

"No," she said. "But with care, and with proper management of our electric apparatus, I accomplished this year a change almost as great. I can show you in my flower-bed one little white flower, of no great beauty and conical in shape, from which I have produced in two years another, saucer-shaped, pink, and of thrice the size, almost exactly realising an imaginary flower, drawn by my sister-in-law to represent one of which she had dreamed. We can often produce the very shape, size, and colour we wish from something that at first seems to have no likeness to it whatever; and I have been told that a skilful farmer will often obtain a fruit, or, what is more difficult, an animal, to answer exactly the ideal he has formed."

"Some of our breeders," I said, "profess to develop a sort of ideal of any given species; but it takes many generations, by picking and choosing those that vary in the right direction, to accomplish anything of the kind; and, after all, the difference between the original and the improved form is mere development, not essential change."

She hardly seemed to understand this, but answered—

"The seedling or rootlet would be just like the original plant, if we did not from the first control its growth by means of our electric frames. But if you will allow me, I will show you to-morrow what I have done in my own flower-bed, and you will have opportunities of seeing afterwards how very much more is done by agriculturists with much more time and much more potent electricities."

"At any rate," I said, "if I had known your object, you certainly should have had the flowers for which you risked so much: and if I remain here three days longer, I promise you plenty of specimens for your experiment."

"You do not mean to go back to the Astronaut?" she asked, with an air of absolute consternation.

"I had not intended to do so," I replied, "for it seems to be perfectly safe under your father's seal and your stringent laws of property. But now, if time permit, I must get these flowers to which you tell me I am so deeply indebted."

"You are very kind," returned Eveena earnestly, "but I entreat you not to venture there again. I should be utterly miserable while you were running such a risk again, and for such a trifle."

"It is no such terrible risk to me, and to please you is not quite a trifle. Besides, I ought to deserve my prize better than I have yet done. But you seem to have some especial spite against the unlucky vessel that brought me here; and that," I added, smiling, "seems hardly gracious in a bride of an hour."

“No, no!” she murmured, evidently much distressed; “but the vessel that brought you here may take you away.”

“I will not pain you yet by saying that I hope it may. At all events, it shall not do so till you are content that it should.”

She made no answer, and seemed for some time to hesitate, as if afraid or unwilling to say something which rose irrepressibly to her lips. A few persuasive words, however, encouraged her, and she found her voice, though with a faltering accent, which greatly surprised me when I learned at last the purport of her request.

“I do not understand,” she said, “your ideas or customs, but I know they are different from ours. I have found at least that they make you much more indulgent and tender to women than our own; and I hope, therefore, you will forgive me if I ask more than I have any right to do.”

“I could scarcely refuse my bride’s first request, whatever it might be. But your hesitation and your apologies might make me fear that you are about to ask something which one or both of us may wish hereafter had neither been asked nor granted.”

She still hesitated and faltered, till I began to fancy that her wish must have a much graver import than I at first supposed. Perhaps to treat the matter lightly and sportively would be the course most likely to encourage her to explain it.

“What is it, child,” I asked, “which you think the stranger of another world more likely to grant than one of your own race, and which is so extravagant, nevertheless, that you tremble to ask it even from me? Is it too much to be bound not to appeal against me to the law, which cannot yet determine whether I am a reality or a fiction? Or have I proved my arm a little too substantial? Must the giant promise not to exercise the masculine prerogative of physical force safely conceded to the dwarf? Fie, Eveena! I am almost afraid to touch you, lest I should hurt you unawares; lest tenderness itself should transgress the limit of legal cruelty, and do grave bodily harm to a creature so much more like a fairy than a woman!”

“No, no!” she expostulated, not at all reciprocating the jesting tone in which I spoke. “If you would consent to give such a promise, it is just one of those we should wish unmade. How could I ask you to promise that I may behave as ill as I please? I dare say I shall be frightened to tears when you are angry; but I shall never wish you to retain your anger rather than vent it and forgive. The proverb says, ‘Who punishes pardons; who hates awaits.’ No, pray do not play with me; I am so much in earnest. I know that I don’t understand where and why your thoughts and ways are so unlike ours. But—but—I thought—I fancied—you seemed to hold the tie between man and wife something more—faster—more lasting—than—our contract has made it.”

“Certainly! With us it lasts for life at least; and even here, where it may be broken at pleasure, I should not have thought that, on the very bridal eve, the coldest heart could willingly look forward to its dissolution.”

She was too innocent of such a thought—perhaps too much absorbed by her own purpose—to catch the hint of unjust reproach.

“Well, then,” she said, with a desperate effort, in a voice that trembled between the fear of offending by presumption or exaction, and the desire to give utterance to her wish—“I want ... will you say that—if by that time you do not think that I have been too faulty, too undeserving—that I shall go with you when you quit this world?” And, her eagerness at last overpowering her shyness, she looked up anxiously into my face.

We wholly misconceived each other. She drooped in bitter disappointment, mistaking my blank surprise for displeasure; her words brought over my mind a rush of that horror with which I ever recall the scenes I witnessed but too often at Indian funerals.

“That, of course, will rest with yourself. But even should I hereafter deserve and win such love as would prompt the wish, I trust you will never dream of cutting short your life because—in the ordinary course of nature—mine should end long before the term of yours.”

Her face again brightened, and she looked up more shyly but not less earnestly.

“I did not make my meaning clear,” she replied. “I spoke not, as my father sometimes speaks, of leaving this world, when he means to remind us that death is only a departure to another; though that was, not so long ago, the only meaning the words could bear. I was thinking of your journey, and I want you to take me with you when you go.”

“You have quite settled in your own mind that I shall go! And in truth you have now removed, as you yesterday created, the only obstacle. If you would not go with me, I might, rather than give you up, have given up the whole purpose of my enterprise, and have left my friends, and the world from which I came, ignorant whether it had ever been accomplished. But if you accompany me, I shall certainly try to regain my own planet.”

“Then,” she said hopefully, but half confidently, “when you go, if I have not given you cause of lasting displeasure, you will take me with you? Most men do not think much of promises, especially of promises made to women; but I have heard you speak as if to break a plighted word were a thing impossible.”

“I promise,” I returned earnestly, very much moved by a proof of real affection such as I had no right to expect, and certainly had not anticipated. “I give you the word of one who has never lied, that if, when the time comes, you wish to go with me, you shall. But by that time, you will probably have a better idea what are the dangers you are asking to share.”

“What can that matter?” she answered. “I suppose in almost any case we should escape or die together? To leave me here is to inflict certainly, and at once, the worst that can possibly befall me; to take me gives me the hope of living or dying with you; and even if I were killed, I should be with you, and feel that you were kind to me, to the last.”

“I little thought,” said I, hesitating long for some expression of tenderness, which the language of

Mars refuses to furnish,—”I little thought to find in a world of which selfishness seems to be the paramount principle, and the absence of real love even between man and woman the most prevalent characteristic, a wife so true to the best and deepest meaning of wedlock. Still less could I have hoped to find such a wife in one who had scarcely spoken to me twenty-four hours before our marriage. If my unexampled adventure had had no other reward—if I had cared nothing for the triumph of discovering a new world with all its wonders—Eveena, this discovery alone is reward in full for all my studies, toils, and perils. For all I have done and risked already, for all the risks of the future, I am tenfold repaid in winning you.”

She looked up at these words with an expression in which there was more of bewilderment and incredulity than of satisfaction, evidently touched by the earnestness of my tone, but scarcely understanding my words better than if I had spoken in my own tongue. It would not be worthwhile to record the next hour’s conversation; I would only note the strong and painful impression it left upon my mind. There was in Eveena’s language and demeanour a timidity—a sort of tentative fearful venturing as on dangerous ground, feeling her way, as it were, in almost every sentence—which could not be wholly attributed to the shyness of a very young and very suddenly wedded bride. There was enough and to spare of this shyness; but more of the sheer physical or nervous fear of a child suddenly left in hands whose reputed severity has thoroughly frightened her; not daring to give offence by silence, but afraid at each word to give yet more fatal offence in speaking. Longer experience of a world in which even the first passion of love is devoid of tenderness—in which asserted equality has long since deprived women of that claim to indulgence which can only rest on acknowledged weakness—taught me but too well the meaning of this fearful, trembling anxiety to please, or rather not to offend. I suppose that even a brutal master hardly likes to see a child cower in his presence as if constantly expecting a blow; and this cowering was so evident in my bride’s demeanour, that, after trying for a couple of hours to coax her into confidence and unreserved feminine fluency, I began to feel almost impatient. It was fortunate that, just as my tone involuntarily betrayed to her quick and watchful ear some shade of annoyance, just as I caught a furtive upward glance that seemed to ask what error she had committed and how it might be repaired, a scratching on the door startled her. She did not, however, venture to disengage herself from the hand which now held her own, but only moved half-imperceptibly aside with a slight questioning look and gesture, as if tacitly asking to be released. As I still held her fast, she was silent, till the unnoticed scratching had been two or three times repeated, and then half-whispered, “Shall I tell them to come in?” When I released her, there appeared to my surprise at her call, no human intruder, but one of the ambau, bearing on a tray a goblet, which, as he placed it on a table beside us, I perceived to contain a liquid rather different from any yet offered me. The presence of these mute servants is generally no more heeded than that of our cats and dogs; but I now learnt that Martial ideas of delicacy forbid them, even as human servants would be forbidden, to intrude unannounced on conjugal privacy. When the little creature had departed, I tasted the liquid, but its flavour was so unpleasant that I set down the vessel immediately. Eveena, however, took it up, and drinking a part of it, with an effort to control the grimace of dislike it provoked, held it up to me again, so evidently expecting and inviting me to share it that courtesy permitted no further demur. A second sign or look, when I set it down unemptied, induced me to finish the draught. Regarding the matter as some trivial but indispensable ceremonial, I took no further notice of it; but, thankful for the diversion it had given to my thoughts, continued my endeavours to soothe and encourage my fair companion. After a few minutes it seemed as if she were somewhat suddenly gaining courage and

confidence. At the same time I myself became aware of a mental effect which I promptly ascribed to the draught. Nor was I wrong. It contained one of those drugs which I have mentioned; so rarely used in this house that I had never before seen or tasted any of them, but given, as matter of course, on any occasion that is supposed to involve unusual agitation or make an exceptional call on nerves or spirits. But for the influence of this cup I should still have withheld the remark which, nevertheless, I had resolved to make as soon as I could hope to do so without annoying or alarming Eveena.

“Are you afraid of me?” I asked somewhat abruptly. The question may have startled her, but I was more startled by the answer.

“Of course,” she said in a tone which would have been absolutely matter of fact, except that the doubt evidently surprised her. “Ought I not to be so? But what made you ask? And what had I done to displease you, just before they sent us the ‘courage cup’?”

“I did not mean to show anything like displeasure,” I replied. “But I was thinking then, and I may tell you now, that you remind me not of the women of my own Earth, but of petted children suddenly transferred to a harsh school. You speak and look like such a child, as if you expected each moment at least to be severely scolded, if not beaten, without knowing your fault.”

“Not yet,” she murmured, with a smile which seemed to me more painful than tears would have been. “But please don’t speak as if I should fear anything so much as being scolded by you. We have a saying that ‘the hand may bruise the skin, the tongue can break the heart.’”

“True enough,” I said; “only on Earth it is mostly woman’s tongue that breaks the heart, and men must not in return bruise the skin.”

“Why not?” she asked. “You said to my mother the other day that Argâ (the fretful child of Esmo’s adoption) deserved to be beaten.”

“Women are supposed,” I answered, “to be amenable to milder influences; and a man must be drunk or utterly brutal before he could deal harshly with a creature so gentle and so fragile as yourself.”

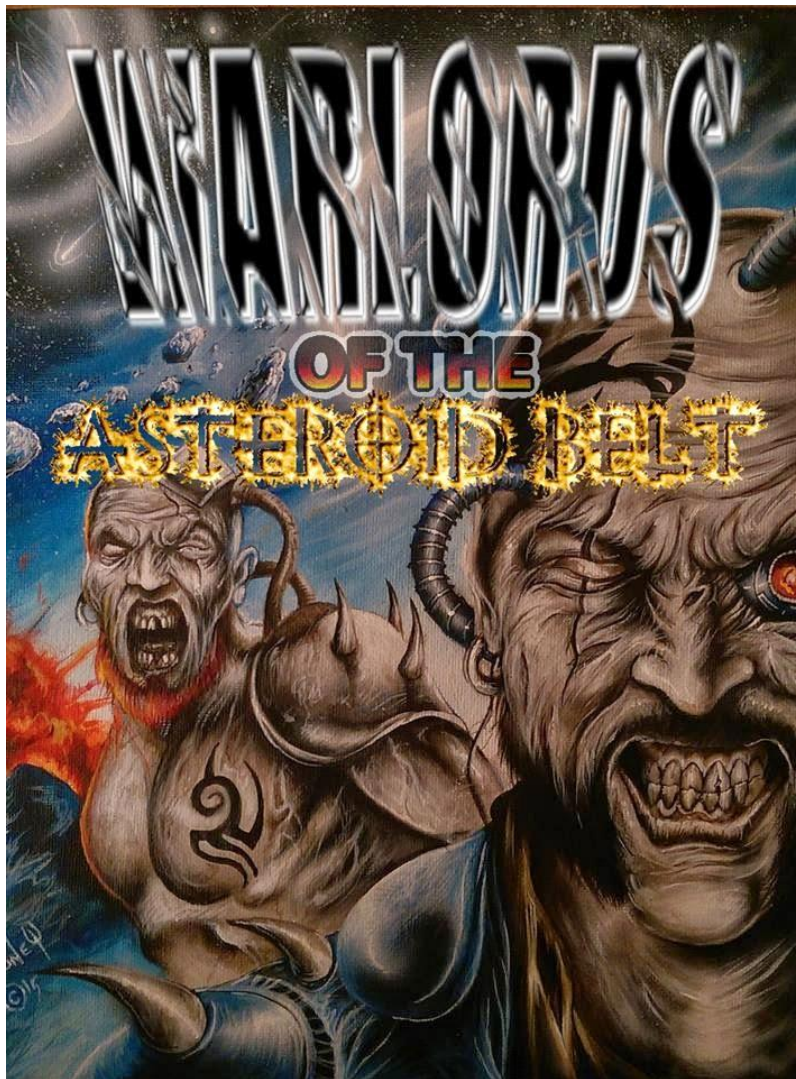
“Don’t spoil me,” she said, with a pretty half-mournful, half-playful glance. “‘A petted bride makes an unhappy wife.’ Surely it is no true kindness to tempt us to count on an indulgence that cannot last.”

“There is among us,” I rejoined, “a saying about ‘breaking a butterfly on the wheel’—as if one spoke of driving away the tiny birds that nestle and feed in your flowers with a hammer. To apply your proverbs to yourself would be to realise this proverb of ours. Can you not let me pet and spoil my little flower-bird at least till I have tamed her, and trust me to chastise her as soon as she shall give reason—if I can find a tendril or flower-stem light enough for the purpose?”

“Will you promise to use a hammer when you wish to be rid of her?” said she, glancing up for one moment through her drooping lashes with a look exactly attuned to the mingled archness and

pathos of her tone.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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THE WAR OF THE WORLDS by HG Wells

Book One: The Coming of The Martians

Chapter Fifteen: What Had Happened in Surrey

It was while the curate had sat and talked so wildly to me under the hedge in the flat meadows near Halliford, and while my brother was watching the fugitives stream over Westminster Bridge, that the Martians had resumed the offensive. So far as one can ascertain from the conflicting accounts that have been put forth, the majority of them remained busied with preparations in the Horsell pit until nine that night, hurrying on some operation that disengaged huge volumes of green smoke.

But three certainly came out about eight o'clock and, advancing slowly and cautiously, made their way through Byfleet and Pyrford towards Ripley and Weybridge, and so came in sight of the expectant batteries against the setting sun. These Martians did not advance in a body, but in a line, each perhaps a mile and a half from his nearest fellow. They communicated with one another by means of sirenlike howls, running up and down the scale from one note to another.

It was this howling and firing of the guns at Ripley and St. George's Hill that we had heard at Upper Halliford. The Ripley gunners, unseasoned artillery volunteers who ought never to have been placed in such a position, fired one wild, premature, ineffectual volley, and bolted on horse and foot through the deserted village, while the Martian, without using his Heat-Ray, walked serenely over their guns, stepped gingerly among them, passed in front of them, and so came unexpectedly upon the guns in Painshill Park, which he destroyed.

The St. George's Hill men, however, were better led or of a better mettle. Hidden by a pine wood as they were, they seem to have been quite unsuspected by the Martian nearest to them. They laid their guns as deliberately as if they had been on parade, and fired at about a thousand yards' range.

The shells flashed all round him, and he was seen to advance a few paces, stagger, and go down. Everybody yelled together, and the guns were reloaded in frantic haste. The overthrown Martian set up a prolonged ululation, and immediately a second glittering giant, answering him, appeared over the trees to the south. It would seem that a leg of the tripod had been smashed by one of the shells. The whole of the second volley flew wide of the Martian on the ground, and, simultaneously, both his companions brought their Heat-Rays to bear on the battery. The ammunition blew up, the pine trees all about the guns flashed into fire, and only one or two of the men who were already running over the crest of the hill escaped.

After this it would seem that the three took counsel together and halted, and the scouts who were watching them report that they remained absolutely stationary for the next half hour. The Martian who had been overthrown crawled tediously out of his hood, a small brown figure, oddly suggestive from that distance of a speck of blight, and apparently engaged in the repair of his support. About nine he had finished, for his cowl was then seen above the trees again.

It was a few minutes past nine that night when these three sentinels were joined by four other Martians, each carrying a thick black tube. A similar tube was handed to each of the three, and the seven proceeded to distribute themselves at equal distances along a curved line between St. George's Hill, Weybridge, and the village of Send, southwest of Ripley.

A dozen rockets sprang out of the hills before them so soon as they began to move, and warned the waiting batteries about Ditton and Esher. At the same time four of their fighting machines, similarly armed with tubes, crossed the river, and two of them, black against the western sky, came into sight of myself and the curate as we hurried wearily and painfully along the road that runs northward out of Halliford. They moved, as it seemed to us, upon a cloud, for a milky mist covered the fields and rose to a third of their height.

At this sight the curate cried faintly in his throat, and began running; but I knew it was no good running from a Martian, and I turned aside and crawled through dewy nettles and brambles into the broad ditch by the side of the road. He looked back, saw what I was doing, and turned to join me.

The two halted, the nearer to us standing and facing Sunbury, the remoter being a grey indistinctness towards the evening star, away towards Staines.

The occasional howling of the Martians had ceased; they took up their positions in the huge crescent about their cylinders in absolute silence. It was a crescent with twelve miles between its horns. Never since the devising of gunpowder was the beginning of a battle so still. To us and to an observer about Ripley it would have had precisely the same effect--the Martians seemed in solitary possession of the darkling night, lit only as it was by the slender moon, the stars, the afterglow of the daylight, and the ruddy glare from St. George's Hill and the woods of Painshill.

But facing that crescent everywhere--at Staines, Hounslow, Ditton, Esher, Ockham, behind hills and woods south of the river, and across the flat grass meadows to the north of it, wherever a cluster of trees or village houses gave sufficient cover--the guns were waiting. The signal rockets burst and rained their sparks through the night and vanished, and the spirit of all those watching batteries rose to a tense expectation. The Martians had but to advance into the line of fire, and instantly those motionless black forms of men, those guns glittering so darkly in the early night, would explode into a thunderous fury of battle.

No doubt the thought that was uppermost in a thousand of those vigilant minds, even as it was uppermost in mine, was the riddle--how much they understood of us. Did they grasp that we in our millions were organized, disciplined, working together? Or did they interpret our spurts of fire, the sudden stinging of our shells, our steady investment of their encampment, as we should the furious unanimity of onslaught in a disturbed hive of bees? Did they dream they might exterminate us? (At that time no one knew what food they needed.) A hundred such questions struggled together in my mind as I watched that vast sentinel shape. And in the back of my mind was the sense of all the huge unknown and hidden forces Londonward. Had they prepared pitfalls? Were the powder mills at Hounslow ready as a snare? Would the Londoners have the heart and courage to make a greater Moscow of their mighty province of houses?

Then, after an interminable time, as it seemed to us, crouching and peering through the hedge, came a sound like the distant concussion of a gun. Another nearer, and then another. And then the Martian beside us raised his tube on high and discharged it, gunwise, with a heavy report that made the ground heave. The one towards Staines answered him. There was no flash, no smoke, simply that loaded detonation.

I was so excited by these heavy minute-guns following one another that I so far forgot my personal safety and my scalded hands as to clamber up into the hedge and stare towards Sunbury. As I did so a second report followed, and a big projectile hurtled overhead towards Hounslow. I expected at least to see smoke or fire, or some such evidence of its work. But all I saw was the deep blue sky above, with one solitary star, and the white mist spreading wide and low beneath. And there had been no crash, no answering explosion. The silence was restored; the minute lengthened to three.

“What has happened?” said the curate, standing up beside me.

“Heaven knows!” said I.

A bat flickered by and vanished. A distant tumult of shouting began and ceased. I looked again at the Martian, and saw he was now moving eastward along the riverbank, with a swift, rolling motion.

Every moment I expected the fire of some hidden battery to spring upon him; but the evening calm was unbroken. The figure of the Martian grew smaller as he receded, and presently the mist and the gathering night had swallowed him up. By a common impulse we clambered higher. Towards Sunbury was a dark appearance, as though a conical hill had suddenly come into being there, hiding our view of the farther country; and then, remoter across the river, over Walton, we saw another such summit. These hill-like forms grew lower and broader even as we stared.

Moved by a sudden thought, I looked northward, and there I perceived a third of these cloudy black kopjes had risen.

Everything had suddenly become very still. Far away to the southeast, marking the quiet, we heard the Martians hooting to one another, and then the air quivered again with the distant thud of their guns. But the earthly artillery made no reply.

Now at the time we could not understand these things, but later I was to learn the meaning of these ominous kopjes that gathered in the twilight. Each of the Martians, standing in the great crescent I have described, had discharged, by means of the gunlike tube he carried, a huge canister over whatever hill, copse, cluster of houses, or other possible cover for guns, chanced to be in front of him. Some fired only one of these, some two--as in the case of the one we had seen; the one at Ripley is said to have discharged no fewer than five at that time. These canisters smashed on striking the ground--they did not explode--and incontinently disengaged an enormous volume of heavy, inky vapour, coiling and pouring upward in a huge and ebony cumulus cloud, a gaseous hill that sank and spread itself slowly over the surrounding country. And the touch of that vapour, the inhaling of its pungent wisps, was death to all that breathes.

It was heavy, this vapour, heavier than the densest smoke, so that, after the first tumultuous uprush and outflow of its impact, it sank down through the air and poured over the ground in a manner rather liquid than gaseous, abandoning the hills, and streaming into the valleys and ditches and watercourses even as I have heard the carbonic-acid gas that pours from volcanic clefts is wont to do. And where it came upon water some chemical action occurred, and the surface would be instantly covered with a powdery scum that sank slowly and made way for more. The scum was absolutely insoluble, and it is a strange thing, seeing the instant effect of the gas, that one could drink without hurt the water from which it had been strained. The vapour did not diffuse as a true gas would do. It hung together in banks, flowing sluggishly down the slope of the land and driving reluctantly before the wind, and very slowly it combined with the mist and moisture of the air, and sank to the earth in the form of dust. Save that an unknown element giving a group of four lines in the blue of the spectrum is concerned, we are still entirely ignorant of the nature of this substance.

Once the tumultuous upheaval of its dispersion was over, the black smoke clung so closely to the ground, even before its precipitation, that fifty feet up in the air, on the roofs and upper stories of high houses and on great trees, there was a chance of escaping its poison altogether, as was proved even that night at Street Cobham and Ditton.

The man who escaped at the former place tells a wonderful story of the strangeness of its coiling flow, and how he looked down from the church spire and saw the houses of the village rising like ghosts out of its inky nothingness. For a day and a half he remained there, weary, starving and sun-scorched, the earth under the blue sky and against the prospect of the distant hills a velvet-black expanse, with red roofs, green trees, and, later, black-veiled shrubs and gates, barns, outhouses, and walls, rising here and there into the sunlight.

But that was at Street Cobham, where the black vapour was allowed to remain until it sank of its own accord into the ground. As a rule the Martians, when it had served its purpose, cleared the air of it again by wading into it and directing a jet of steam upon it.

This they did with the vapour banks near us, as we saw in the starlight from the window of a deserted house at Upper Halliford, whither we had returned. From there we could see the searchlights on Richmond Hill and Kingston Hill going to and fro, and about eleven the windows rattled, and we heard the sound of the huge siege guns that had been put in position there. These continued intermittently for the space of a quarter of an hour, sending chance shots at the invisible Martians at Hampton and Ditton, and then the pale beams of the electric light vanished, and were replaced by a bright red glow.

Then the fourth cylinder fell--a brilliant green meteor--as I learned afterwards, in Bushey Park. Before the guns on the Richmond and Kingston line of hills began, there was a fitful cannonade far away in the southwest, due, I believe, to guns being fired haphazard before the black vapour could overwhelm the gunners.

So, setting about it as methodically as men might smoke out a wasps' nest, the Martians spread this strange stifling vapour over the Londonward country. The horns of the crescent slowly

moved apart, until at last they formed a line from Hanwell to Coombe and Malden. All night through their destructive tubes advanced. Never once, after the Martian at St. George's Hill was brought down, did they give the artillery the ghost of a chance against them. Wherever there was a possibility of guns being laid for them unseen, a fresh canister of the black vapour was discharged, and where the guns were openly displayed the Heat-Ray was brought to bear.

By midnight the blazing trees along the slopes of Richmond Park and the glare of Kingston Hill threw their light upon a network of black smoke, blotting out the whole valley of the Thames and extending as far as the eye could reach. And through this two Martians slowly waded, and turned their hissing steam jets this way and that.

They were sparing of the Heat-Ray that night, either because they had but a limited supply of material for its production or because they did not wish to destroy the country but only to crush and overawe the opposition they had aroused. In the latter aim they certainly succeeded. Sunday night was the end of the organised opposition to their movements. After that no body of men would stand against them, so hopeless was the enterprise. Even the crews of the torpedo-boats and destroyers that had brought their quick-firers up the Thames refused to stop, mutinied, and went down again. The only offensive operation men ventured upon after that night was the preparation of mines and pitfalls, and even in that their energies were frantic and spasmodic.

One has to imagine, as well as one may, the fate of those batteries towards Esher, waiting so tensely in the twilight. Survivors there were none. One may picture the orderly expectation, the officers alert and watchful, the gunners ready, the ammunition piled to hand, the limber gunners with their horses and waggons, the groups of civilian spectators standing as near as they were permitted, the evening stillness, the ambulances and hospital tents with the burned and wounded from Weybridge; then the dull resonance of the shots the Martians fired, and the clumsy projectile whirling over the trees and houses and smashing amid the neighbouring fields.

One may picture, too, the sudden shifting of the attention, the swiftly spreading coils and bellyings of that blackness advancing headlong, towering heavenward, turning the twilight to a palpable darkness, a strange and horrible antagonist of vapour striding upon its victims, men and horses near it seen dimly, running, shrieking, falling headlong, shouts of dismay, the guns suddenly abandoned, men choking and writhing on the ground, and the swift broadening-out of the opaque cone of smoke. And then night and extinction--nothing but a silent mass of impenetrable vapour hiding its dead.

Before dawn the black vapour was pouring through the streets of Richmond, and the disintegrating organism of government was, with a last expiring effort, rousing the population of London to the necessity of flight.

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