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Schlock!

WEBZINE

**VOL. 12, ISSUE 23
25TH FEBRUARY
2018**

MORNING'S EARLY LIGHT

**BY PD DAWSON—
'DON'T GO NEAR
THAT GIRL, JON!'**

EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH

**BY ALEX B
JOHNSON—
I NEEDED THE
MONEY...**

THE DEAD IN PRINT BY GK MURPHY

CARTER WARD

**THE SEARCH FOR
ASTRA PALACE**

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by
Gavin Chappell

PUBLISHED BY:
Schlock! Publications
(www.schlock.co.uk)

Schlock! Webzine

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 12, Issue 23
25th February 2018

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

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Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, graphic novels and comic strips, reviews and art. Submit fiction, articles, art, or links to your own site to editor@schlock.co.uk. We will also Review published and self-published novels. Please contact the editor at the above email address for further details.

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EDITORIAL

MORNING'S EARLY LIGHT by PD Dawson— *'Don't go near that girl, Jon!'* HORROR

EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH by Alex S Johnson—*I needed the money...* HORROR

THE DEAD IN PRINT by GK Murphy— *The monsters were everywhere...* HORROR

THE MASTERS by Steven Havelock—*He saw tears in Clara's eyes...* HORROR

REVIEW by John C Adams— *Lighthouses: An Anthology of Dark Tales...* ARTICLE

THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE Part One by Gregory KH Bryant—*Carter Ward was not
in any good mood...* SPACE OPERA

ACROSS THE ZODIAC Chapter Seven by Percy Greg—*Escort Duty...* PLANETARY
ROMANCE

THE WAR OF THE WORLDS Book One: Chapter Twelve by HG Wells— *What I Saw of The
Destruction of Weybridge And Shepperton...* SCIENCE FICTION CLASSIC

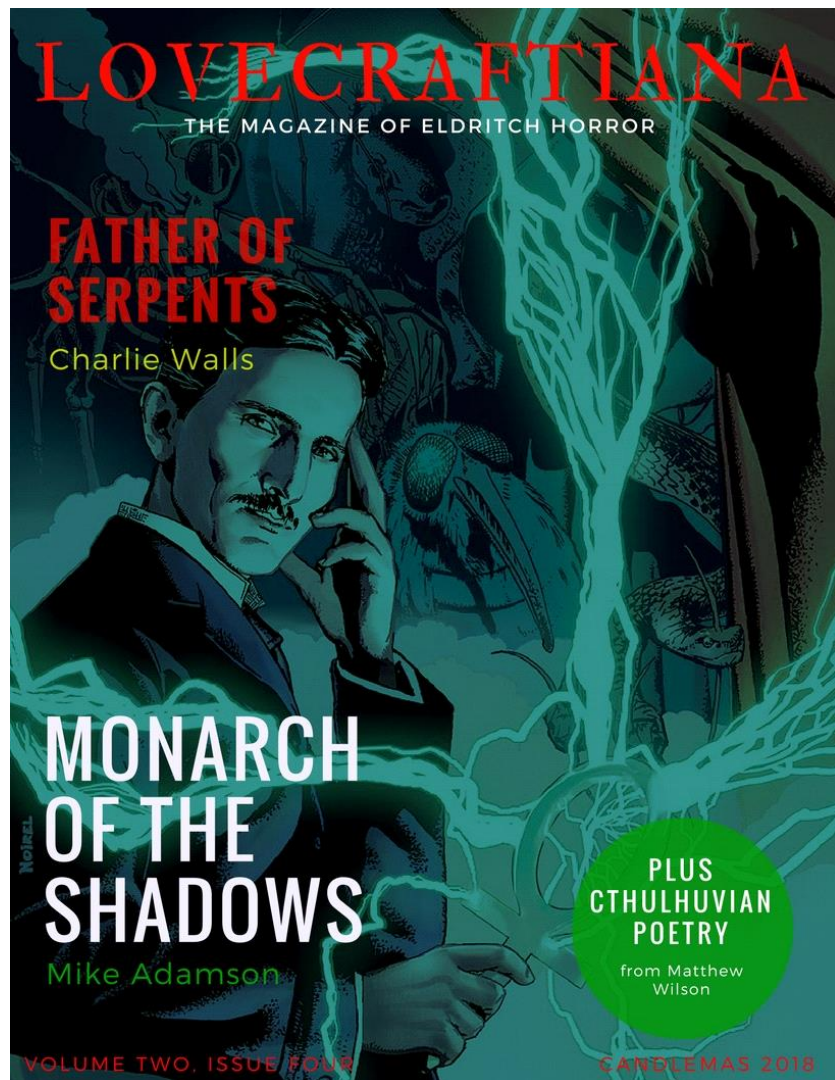
EDITORIAL

This week, Jon meets a sinister girl in a nightclub. A pizza delivery man explains just what it was about his job that sent him over the edge. The Dead congregate across America. And Jarik gets a once in a lifetime opportunity to leave the *bubble*.

John C Adams reviews an anthology of dark tales. Carter Ward returns, looking for Scroungers. The space traveller and Eveena examine the Astronaut. And we receive a grandstand view of the Martians' destruction of Weybridge and Shepperton.

—Gavin Chappell

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



[Return to Contents](#)

MORNING'S EARLY LIGHT by PD Dawson

The club was heaving with sweating bodies under a spell of trancing music and strobing lights. Jon, who just recently moved to Mount Loch, was at the side of the bar queuing for another drink, unable to take his eyes off a blonde girl on the dancefloor.

'Don't go near that girl, Jon!' Toby shouted, trying to raise his voice above the thunderous beat of the music.

'Why the hell not, Tobe?' he replied. 'She's pretty hot, ain't she? Blonder hair, blue eyes, white angelic skin, and a shapely body too. Tell me, what's not to love? And she's been giving me the eye too.'

Toby shook his head vigorously. 'Look, I can't tell you why, you wouldn't believe me anyway, but just don't go near her or you'll end up a statistic. People regularly go missing from this small town, and there's a reason for it, Jon, there's a reason...'

'Come on, there ain't much to do in this shit town as it is, so don't tell me the girls are off limits too. And why do people go missing?'

'Not all the girls are off, just her. Look, I've already said too much, and there's a chance she might hear me.'

'Nah, you're drunk and talking rubbish. She's like thirty-feet away and the music's loud as hell, how could she hear you?'

'You're the only one who's drunk Jon, and like you said, she's got her eye on you, so the best thing you can do is go home. That's where I'm going, and I think you should come too. I've not known you long, but still, I wouldn't want to see you get hurt.'

'Fine Tobe, see you later then,' Jon shouted as Toby walked away from the bar, 'thought you were a cool guy and gonna show me the town, but I guess I'll have to make some new friends, friends who don't have limits.'

Jon stayed at the bar and downed another double Jack before heading back onto the dancefloor. As he worked his way through the crowded floor, he could smell the stale sweat and fetid odour of young men whose hormones were working overtime, but his own confidence came from the warmth of the whiskey burning inside his chest. He hadn't been imagining it either, the blonde girl on the dancefloor had been giving him the eye, Toby had seen it, and he had seen it too. Just the look she had given him stirred a feeling in his loins that he couldn't shake and when he found her and danced within a foot of her body, he looked into her eyes and could feel the blood pulse in his neck so hard it almost hurt. Thinking he was going to faint, she moved closer to him and opened up her palm to reveal a little white pill that glittered under the strobing lights. He shook his head, but she took it in her fingers and pushed it past his lips. He felt dominated by her and swallowed with an urgent gulp, as if she had put him under some kind of spell.

He continued to dance close to her body and felt her voluptuous hips rubbing against his as the music spiralled out of control. He danced with her for a few minutes when all of a sudden, the beat of the music, along with the many arms and legs on the dancefloor, started to slow down. He had seen it before in music videos, the way people's arms slowly rise towards the ceiling, before falling again, and their lips open and close with more relevance and more impact. It had to be the drug taking effect, for every moment was profoundly vivid and his focus became extra sharp, even though his head felt woozy. He continued to dance as the faces of the people around him slowly morphed into ugly beings. Their expressions were strange and alien to him and he realised it was because he had begun to drool like a baby and his tongue was out of control. He didn't want to think about how he must have looked.

'Wha di yu gi me?' he asked the blonde girl as she danced around him.

'Don't worry about it,' she replied, flicking her long blonde hair over her shoulder. 'What you're feeling is perfectly normal. Just enjoy the zen of the moment.'

'Wha bout their aces, hay all ate me?' he replied.

'Come with me and I'll sort you out.'

She grabbed hold of his arm and dragged him off the dance floor and towards the toilets. He was powerless to refrain and felt so woozy he couldn't do anything about it. As she pulled him past the girls fixing their makeup in the smeared mirrors he realised he was in the girls' toilets, but she dragged him powerfully into one of the cubicles before he could protest. He wasn't sure what he was in for, but he could feel his legs weakening and he started to slip towards the floor.

'Oh no you don't, mister,' she said, holding him up, 'you ain't sleeping here, not right now. We've got something we need to do first.'

He heard girlish giggles coming from outside the cubicle and he was taken aback by her power as she pulled him onto his feet again. She was a slender girl and every part of her looked like it would easily break, but she lifted him up as if he weighed nothing.

'Yer pretty toff,' he said, still unable to talk normally.

'Yeah, I'm tough alright, now just shut up and kiss me!'

Everything happened in slow motion and he could see her luscious ruby lips moving towards his. The force of the kiss was hard, and he thanked god that her lips were soft. After a while he felt his lips begin to move in unison with hers, but instead of exchanging saliva, he felt her tongue push his aside with a tremendous force and he could feel it making its way down the back of his throat. He felt he should have pulled away, but the drug had made him so weak and confused that he couldn't do anything but let it happen. His gag reflex was also apparently gone, as his muscles failed to contract, and his lungs were hurting as if the air had been completely sucked out of them.

After a few seconds he began to have visions of iridescent light and a strange calm came over him as his body began to feel fluid and free. He felt as if he were nothing more than water running down a stream, or a river of water unfazed by rapids. His body was opening up to her like a flower, and, though he knew it wasn't possible, he could feel her tongue reaching his stomach and moving around his body freely at will, as if he didn't have any substance. After a few seconds more he could feel her tongue loosening its grip on his body and then their tight and warm embrace ended with him leaning over and heaving for breath. He struggled at first to draw air back into his lungs, but after belching up a sticky and gloopy red mess into the toilet, he felt his lungs slowly recover and fill once more with air.

'What di yu just do ta me?' he asked.

'I call it a kissfuck,' she said, 'but my sisters don't like that expression. Now, let's get some fresh air, shall we?'

She climbed onto the toilet seat and opened the window at the top before pulling herself out onto the roof. He was about to open the cubicle door and run away, but her arm reached back through the window and she pulled him up as if he weighed no more than a feather. He found himself upside down and staring at the stars for a few seconds before she pulled him up into a seating position so that he was staring into her eyes instead of the night sky. Under the light of the moon, and as he looked deep into her blue azure eyes, he forgot all about the kiss and how her tongue had made its way down his throat.

'Will you stay with me for a little while?' she asked.

'Sure,' he replied, and he realised he could speak normally again and felt very relaxed, albeit a touch confused, 'but tell me, should we really be up here on the roof? Won't we get into trouble if someone finds us up here?'

'No,' she replied harshly, 'me and my sisters own the club, so we can do whatever the fuck we like.'

'You own it?' he asked, exasperated. 'So, anyway, what's your name? I don't know anything about you.'

'Neona,' she replied, 'now come over here and have a good look at this full moon.'

He felt like he could have slept for a week, but he followed her to the edge and saw the hills and mountains in the distance were aglow under the moon's subtle and almost blue neon light. He had almost forgotten how beautiful the surroundings of his new home town were and everything seemed so vivid and intense he wondered why he hadn't appreciated it when he arrived with his parents just a few weeks before. He could even see the fresh water cascading silently down the sides of one of the distant mountains, looking like some backdrop to an alien world.

'Don't you just love this spot,' she whispered, 'it's so beautiful. But not everything in this town

is beautiful,' she looked down over the edge of the roof at the drunken people who were just exiting the club. She seemed to hiss at them as they left, as if she were a cat. 'I remember a time,' she said, 'when I was just looking down at horse and carts, driven by respectable people, but hey, I suppose those drunken assholes down there help pay the bills, right? None of them are suitable matches for my sisters or I, so they gotta be good for something. That's why I was so glad to see you tonight, a newbie, and at last, a compatible match.'

'Well wait, something you just said,' he replied, confused, 'you can't mean you remember horse and carts running through this town before cars. That would have been quite a few years ago now and you look so young.'

'Yeah, I look young,' she replied, 'what's your point?'

'Well, you must mean you've seen them in old films or something, but you certainly wouldn't have seen them for yourself.'

'Don't tell me what I have and haven't seen,' she replied. Her temper had risen quickly, like the mists rising from the distant mountains. 'My sisters and I have seen horses and carts, and we have seen this town gradually build up from under us. I remember when this town was nothing but a dusty street and my sisters and I only had a stupid stable to our name, so don't tell me what I have and haven't seen.'

'Oh!' he replied, not really knowing what else to say, just a strong sense that he shouldn't offend her, and certainly under no circumstances patronise her. They then shared a long and uncomfortable silence until she asked him for a cigarette.

He felt inside his jeans pocket and was thankful that he still had the packet he had bought earlier in the night. 'Yeah, here you go, but watch out, those things will kill ya!'

The cigarette was slightly bent as it hung from the corner of her mouth, but as he lit it, he saw a sharpened tooth protruding from her upper lip and he had to look away and pretend he hadn't seen it. 'Say,' he said nervously, 'it will only be another hour or so before the sun comes up. Do you want to stay up here and watch it rise up over the mountains with me? I don't think I've ever done that before, not properly with a girl. Seems sort of romantic, don't you think?'

'Aye, aye, aye,' she replied, 'you humans don't half get all antsy after a kissfuck, don't you? Listen, I've turned you tonight, because your DNA is just right to ensure the ongoing of my species, but don't think that means we're a couple. When I said most of the people down there aren't a match for me or my sisters, I wasn't talking romantically, you understand?'

'Wait, you said you've turned me, but turned me into what?' he replied.

'Listen,' she said, blowing smoke into his face, 'this has been fun and all, but I have to go. I didn't realise it was so late and that the sun would soon be rising. But before I go, my sisters are always telling me I should put more of an effort into educating those that I've potentially turned into one of us. I say potentially, as it doesn't always work. So, if the kissfuck has worked and

you've been successfully turned, here are just a few rules you'll need to follow. Number one, after your first feeding, you won't be able to stand in direct sunlight anymore, so you should always travel at night and ensure you have proper shelter for when day arrives. Number two, not feeding isn't an option, it's a necessity and is kind of like breathing, in that nothing will stop you from doing it. And lastly, and perhaps most importantly, your first feed can't be from a close relative. If you try that, it will make you pretty sick and may kill you.'

'My first feed?'

'Yeah, your first feed. And there is another thing, this small town ain't big enough to occupy the people we have turned, so if you've turned, you'll have to leave town pretty soon. If you want to live, then that part doesn't even need saying. You stay here in town and one of my sisters or I will kill you. After all, our sole purpose in turning you is to ensure the survival of our species. And there ain't enough blood to go around here either. Even my sisters and I have had to start feeding out of town now.'

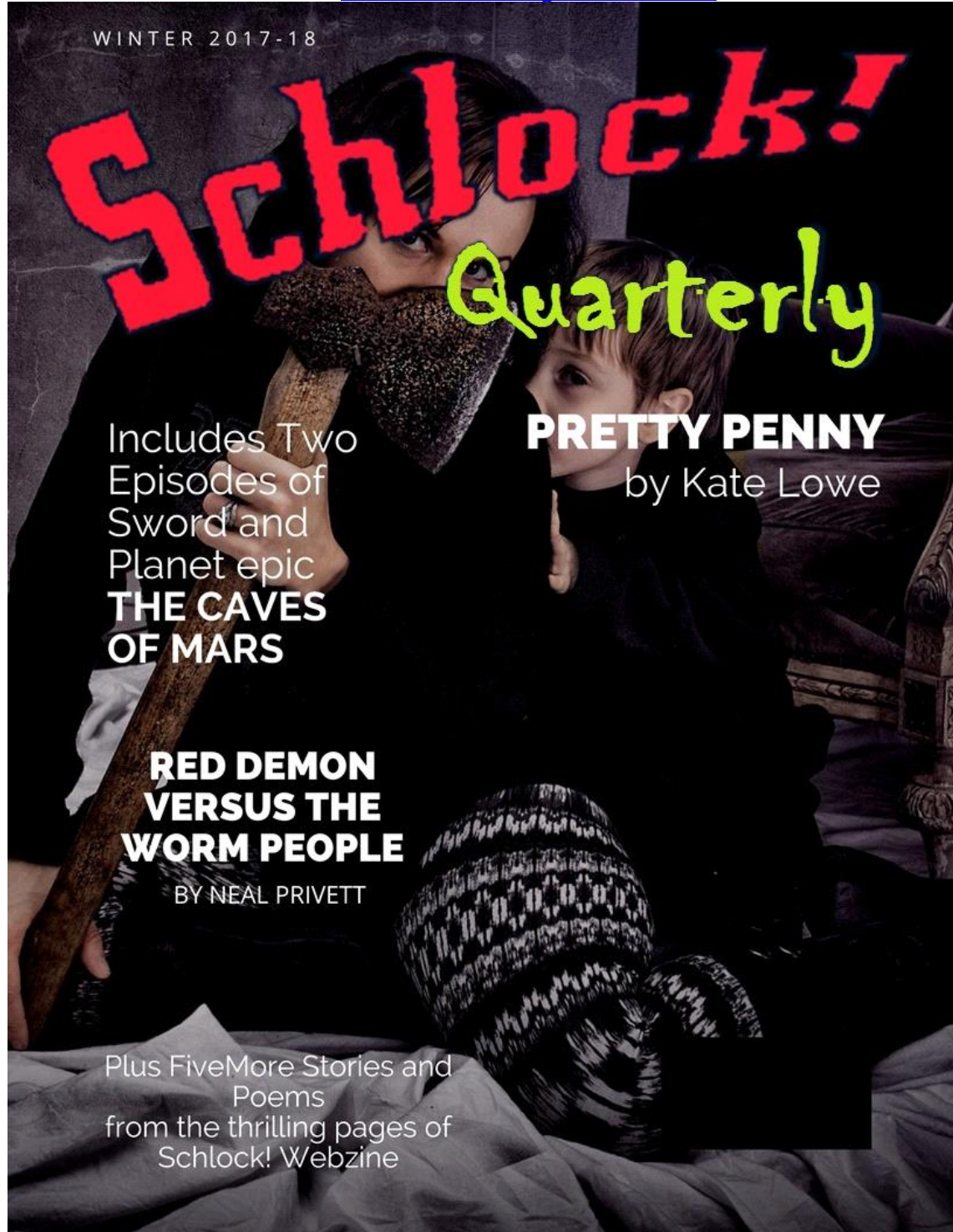
'What? I don't understand a word of what you just said. Tell me you're joking, right?' But she kept backing away from him until she was completely at the edge of the roof. In a split second she held out her arms in a Christ-like pose, and then fell backwards into the night. He looked over the edge, but as he looked down, there were only a few drunken girls and boys exiting the club and she was nowhere to be seen. Rather than climb back into the girls' toilet to get off of the roof, he found a fire ladder on the other side of the building and started to climb down it. His fingers were shaking as he descended, and he felt a soreness swelling in his stomach, but he just wanted to get home and pretend he hadn't heard the things she had just told him, and if the turning thing was real, he hoped it hadn't worked.

When he got home it was still a little dark, but there was a hint of daylight rising over the distant mountains. In the subtle light he felt under the plant pot near the front door to retrieve the keys he had placed there earlier in the night, but as he reached for them the neighbour's cat hissed at him. He couldn't see her in the shallow light, but he heard her dash into the bushes and it made his stomach sink. He felt hated but was sure once stepping inside that, Bruno, the family bulldog, would be waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs. He went inside and was expecting a sloppy mouth and excited feet to greet him, as was the norm, but the dog just whimpered away and kept a close eye on him from the open door of the conservatory. 'Get in your bed, Bruno, go on, get yourself in the warm,' but the dog refused to move.

Tired by the booze and the strangeness of the night, he fell asleep on the floor near the front door and slept there for a few hours until inexplicably awoken with the sound of his younger sister's shallow breathing as she slept upstairs. As his senses came around he could also hear the quickening beat of his mother's heart as she was caught in the throes of a nightmare, and perhaps even more unsettling, he could hear his father's belly rumbling as it quietly hungered for food in the stale heat. And it wasn't just his father that hungered, for under the spell of the morning's early light, he could smell the sweet blood of his neighbours as they rested in their beds, and in that smell, he felt an insatiable and inhuman desire to feed, and feed soon.

THE END

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[Return to Contents](#)

EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH by Alex S Johnson

Thank you for the award. It means a lot to me. And well, as long as we're having this party anyway—although I don't want to cut into your enjoyment, I have a few things to say that, I'm sorry, probably will make the event less fun for you. I don't want to be a joy-kill. And I certainly do appreciate the certificate, and the oversized novelty bonus check, which—is there a special counter at the bank where I can redeem this puppy? Thanks for the laughter, I love you guys. We need that light touch now, I think. You'll see what I mean.

But you know, after that heroic two weeks, which they say is the most hours clocked by any employee for this firm ever since it began in, what was it, 1985? Anyway, serving delicious slices since the mid-80's...sorry, again, and please, help yourself to some of the food and drink...my boss is giving me the kill sign, ha ha ha...I think he's getting nervous about what I'm going to say. No, I haven't had any alcohol. You're making this tougher than necessary. All right, first I should probably tell you that I cannot guarantee any of the refreshments are uncontaminated. Yeah, you should maybe not eat or drink anything if you're at all fastidious. I'm getting blank looks. Okay, let me spell it out. I have reason to believe there may be human body parts in there.

Right, okay, that's not funny. It wasn't meant to be. I'm dead serious. I'm thinking about your welfare over my own, because I understand, after this, at the very least I'm losing my job. There will be police involvement. There will be an investigation. But I wanted you to know what can be involved in working people this way, to this extent, where they lose sleep and may or may not go into a fugue state and become, in fact, a serial killer...while still delivering pizza pies, fifty percent off a small salad and a free drink for only one additional dollar. Although, come to think of it, for the time being you should probably order from another restaurant.

Now if you'll do me the courtesy of not calling in the authorities until I have this off my chest. Of course I'm going to be repeating this to the police, in great detail, and I'm making it clear this was all my doing. I don't want any repercussions to the restaurant. You've been good to me, and this seems like a shabby way to repay you...but to tell the truth, it could happen to anybody. Mandatory overtime could lead to more of this. More people are on the edge than you'd believe. Trust me, I get around, I hear things. You'd be amazed the things people confess to their pizza guy they wouldn't tell another soul.

I needed the money, even if the overtime was required...and don't get me wrong, the tips were generous, although...that sounds like a bad joke, under the circumstances. I'll try to tighten the reins a bit here, I'm all over the place. Once the two weeks were over, I took a few sick days off and caught up on my sleep, which is when I started remembering things. When I got off that mammoth shift, I was so high on adrenaline and...probably blood, if you've never tried it, it's like crack...human blood, I mean...and so sleep-deprived, I thought I could just keep on going into my sick leave and party like a rock star. But as soon as I hit the bed, I was out. I don't know how long I slept, but it was at least 12 hours, and when I woke up, at first I thought I'd been having nightmares. All this sick stuff where I crept up on a customer from behind, dosed them with scopolamine...the so-called "zombie cucumber," story in itself...and scooped out a piece. They'd wake up with no recollection, I sliced up the meat and sprinkled it on the next customer's

pie...kept doing this...plus, I put aside a little pile of the goodness, kept some for myself, for nosh...you need to bear in mind that while all this was happening I had no clue what I was doing. I've tried to reconstruct the time line, when I slipped over the edge into cannibalism, but I can't get an exact fix on the moment. It was probably about 72 hours in. Not that it matters, but because I do want to help the police with their inquiries, as they say...and I see someone has their cell phone out. Please, again, you don't want to do that. I know it doesn't feel like good times and happy times, but we're helping each other here. I need to talk this through at least once before I talk to the cops, and you're as good an audience as any...the best, I mean, I owe it to you, especially in the context of this great award. Once the smoke has cleared and the finite amount of body parts and blood I added to the pies has been...yeah, it's all going to be eaten, sorry...I hope you'll see how ultimately positive an experience this is. You'll never forget it, you'll tell it to your children and they'll tell it to their children...but back to the main thread. Like I said, at first I thought it was a nightmare, pure and simple, but then I checked my phone, and the images...you see, I documented the process while it was happening. I've copied all the jpeg and video files to a portable hard drive and cd's, and if you'd like your own copy I'm happy to make one available, just let me know...okay, guy with the cell phone, I really, really don't want to have to use violence or kidnap anybody at knifepoint to get you to drop that thing, but I will. Obviously I'm not well. So you'll be so kind as...yes, just turn off your cell, and that goes for all of you, and please, please, no more funny business. This won't take much longer, actually.

The movies and jpeg files were kind of funny in a demented way. I mean, they weren't, but they were, you know? Because, and I think this is the main thrust of my confession or whatever you want to call it, we are very, very removed from the food source. You'll see the ingredients for packaged food or whatever and it never once occurs to you they could be making it all up. GMOs are just the tip of the iceberg. Unless you actually grow your own food, or kill it, you don't know what you're consuming. All those urban legends about what goes into hot dogs...well, say you get an organic hot dog that's thoughtfully, mindfully put together out of holistic ingredients in a pastoral setting while the animals listen to gamma frequencies and Tibetan monks chanting. Do you know for an absolute fact that's what happened? No you do not. No you do not. And, come to think of it, here comes the awful, hilarious irony—I can absolutely guarantee what went into these pies. And was sprinkled on these salads...bacon bits, ha ha ha! No—at the risk of sounding like Charlton Heston—they were people, people! So there's me, Jordan Bates, your pizza guy, creeping up behind you, bearing not harmful intent, for I have none, just sleep deprivation, Datura powder, and a will to scoop human flesh...watch for it...I've got the knife, I put it in, I rip out the piece, I put it in a baggie, it slips around like a flounder, I wipe all the surfaces, leave their order on the kitchen table, rush back to the van and put the meat on ice...drive home, wait for the next order, pick up the pie and sides, return home again, make some micro-fine slices or chunks, depending on the pie, deliver, and so forth. So this goes on, and on. How did it start? And why did I have scopolamine on hand in the first place? So that's going to have to be another conversation which I don't have time for. But it does explain why nobody complained...they simply had no memory of what happened, besides the fact that I never let them see my face.

They're going to throw the book at me, and that's okay. Any questions? What's the takeaway from all this, so to speak? I mean, would you like to know anything specific? Yes, you...Annie, was it? Right. Sorry we never had a chance to work directly together, although...I mean you're

probably grateful.

Oh wow. Thank you. That was an incredibly nice thing to say. I didn't expect that. See, there is hope. Right, well, I've got a whole bunch of copies of the documentation in...the van...plus some samples...I don't know the law, or if that makes you an accessory after the fact if you...ate some of the food here, or took some home after hearing me...can't speak to that. But if you want some blood...that's fresh, and you need to drink it quickly before it coagulates. I won't tell you where I got it from...you know, to be honest, this must have happened within the last hour, before I got here, and...whoever I took it from couldn't be alive. So, technically, I did do murder. Pretty sure of that. And I don't have an excuse at all. Unless I'm insane. But obviously, I'm the last person who can reasonably speak to that.

Right, right, and I hear sirens. Thanks a whole fucking lot for making me cram the last part of my presentation into a few minutes before the police get here. The blood is in the red cups. The vegetarian special has thigh meat in it. The meat special is full on, you name it, it's in there. I imagine you'll be able to visit me down at county, or watch the true crime documentary...there won't be any lack of coverage, I'm sure. I'm sorry I had to bring this trauma into your life, but then again...what's the takeaway? Right, two things. People have limits, and no employment justifies abusing those limits. And...know your food source. Oh, and I guess three, if you're really curious, human blood is like crack and will clear the cobwebs in nanoseconds. Help yourself. Thank you.

THE END

[Cyrus Song](#)



Cyrus Song

Steve Laker

[Return to Contents](#)

THE DEAD IN PRINT by GK Murphy

At the foot of the incline, the Good Old Boys and Servicemen had gathered overnight, each holding his or her weapon in preparation for action, willing and able to train their rifles and pick off the Dead which roamed the US in packs, craving fresh kills.

The monsters were everywhere, or so said the news bulletins chronicling the state of the world. It was a loose term, but already they'd had a name awarded them by an unnerved public ...these men and women, in their masses, were referred to quite straightforwardly as The Living Dead.

It was late summer, and the ferocious sun beat down on the backs of the necks of all gathered in the hills. Two buddies, Earl and Nick, sat cracking open bottles of Budweiser as they talked up a good fight, saying the dead Gooks were fair game and once shot could be put out of their misery without much fuss. You just took aim with your rifle, made sure you had their head in your sights, readied yourself to pull that trigger, and BANG, brains and skull everywhere. This was the only way you saw these bastards off. You aimed for the head. You had to destroy the frigging brain!

Nick belched as he slurped from the bottle of Bud. He gestured to the top of the incline, waiting to see any sign of zombies coming over the horizon. They would be picturesque too. As the sun went down, these shuffling corpses would become macabre silhouettes. It was like in a movie, in much respect.

Who could possibly have dreamt up such a bizarre series of events?

Nick spoke as he polished the long neck of his rifle. He said to Earl, "Son, I'm counting these corpses I'm blowing to bits. I just reached twenty-two holes in the heads. Splattered brain is the order of the day!"

Earl wasn't one to speak much to anyone. He was the quiet, brooding sort, one who when he smiled displayed a huge gap between his two front teeth, where the crown he got as a teenager had crumbled during a particular crunchy bowl of muesli five years ago. Now, where the crown had been, was just a weak, pointed shard that annoyed the hell out of him. He smiled as little as possible.

Earl said, "I make my practise about fifteen kills. I don't harm the kids, though. The kids can't help their situation."

"What...? Those little bastards are the worst of them all! I watched a dead kid bite a dude's nuts off yesterday, a dude that instantaneously turned into one of those sum-bitches, before he came looking for me, right then as I aimed my baby and put a bullet between his eyes!"

"Did you kill the kid...? The one who chewed the dude's nuts off...?"

"No, the rusty-haired little midget ran off as I was reloading...lucky for him, too, since I'd have

made him wish he'd never been born in a month of Tuesdays!"

Chuckling, Earl supped his Bud. "Poor little bastard."

On the hillside horizon, a row of The Dead looked to be heading in this here direction. Truth was, though, they travelled in no particular direction at all. They just went where one foot after the next transported them. These peculiar folk survived off memory. That was why they frequented old haunts in their previous lifetimes, before the rare killer virus stole away their sense of humanity and goodwill towards their fellow man and woman, in town and city, all across the land.

Make no mistake, the zombies were everywhere. They were coming to commandeer the entire planet, its systems, its commerce, its habitats, and make them all their own.

These were the new species of mankind.

Earl cocked his gun as he balanced on one knee and aimed. He could see at least three of these motherfuckers as he trained his crosshairs on the first—the one in the middle of the pack.

Soon, Nick got down on one knee and aimed his own rifle in the same direction, towards the three on the horizon. These things were slow-moving. You could run rings around them and they'd cause you no harm in the process. They were stupid, docile and pathetic. Yet, they were sweeping the planet, turning people into creatures like them, hungry for flesh, just walking corpses, killed only by destroying the brain.

Nick said, "I've got the one in the orange dungarees."

"I got the blond woman. Only because she reminds me of my ex-wife Deidre and the rough times she gave me. Shit, I'm going to love blowing this skull apart!" Earl said, as he pulled the trigger and the weapon sounded.

At nearly the same time, Nick fired. It was celebratory almost when the two shot at collapsed to the ground—dead, finally—since their skulls were struck along with their brains, putting them at peace. Nick's bullet struck, and the young man in the orange dungarees groaned as his skull fragmented and his brains emerged from the back of the head, when he fell down. The blond that Earl shot at took the brunt of the strike in the face. However, it was still enough to end that zombie's life.

A Marine slapped Earl on the back. "Damn fine shooting, Tex!"

Earl grinned, his toothy gap showing for all to see. "Why, thank you, sir!" He handed the Marine his rifle, "Here, take a blast. Good practise for wartime, eh?"

The young Marine accepted the rifle heartily. He trained the gun on the half-illuminated horizon and one particular Dead. "Take this, sucker..." the uniformed youngster said, and the weapon discharged.

On the hill, the remaining deceased one slumped to the ground. Its final viewpoint would be one of sludge and damp grass as half of its gnawed face fell.

Nick applauded riotously, as he declared, “Boy, you should be in the US Marines!”

All three men found this hilarious and began to roll around laughing on the ground. But given there was quite a large crowd here, it was strange nobody spotted the two skin-jobs that emerged from behind a Jeep, creeping up on Earl and Nick, after the Serviceman departed to rejoin his fellow Marines in a party elsewhere.

They had no time to reload. They had to fend these bastards off with just their hands and feet, as well as some quick-thinking in order to get the two buddies out of this predicament and back to relative safety. But hell, it was too late for any of that shit. The first zombie—Dead Boy—had latched onto Earl’s neck and tender tissue ripped while blood oozed from the deepening gash. While this happened, Nick was taking it in the right forearm as a killer young girl sank her teeth into his flesh. Both men yelled and screamed, yet neither of the two men could remain standing. Everyone knew once the virus was in your blood stream, the warping effect took a few seconds before you converted into one of the creatures. It never took long to turn.

Now, Nick Michaels and Earl Worthington were full-blooded zombies on the prowl for blood and the rudimentary pounds of flesh. Good friends from childhood, drinking buddies to this day, they often took their wives and kids around to each other’s houses, mostly at weekends to indulge in bating and shooting, or just plain old Sunday luncheon. Wives Susan and Roslyn usually sat in the kitchen most of the time gabbing about the neighbours and how they let the neighbourhood down, unlike these two women whose families were just good, decent all-American Christian folk, who did their best and kept the world in check, and certainly never let anybody’s neighbourhood down.

Susan had just drove the Dodge pick-up around to the gates of the farm, under the wishes of her hubby Earl, who had said if she pick up Nick and him, they’d head for Troy’s Bar in town so as they could grab burgers and beers before the Big Game on TV tonight. Baseball, like NFL, was Earl and Nick’s life, and they wouldn’t have given it up for the world. In fact, it was only two weeks away from the World Series, which purported to be one hell of a match.

The World Series would never happen this year. And nor would it happen next year, or the year after that...never again, in fact.

The two zombies, joined by three others, turned the corner into the car lot. Behind them chaos ensued as people young and old entered a state of mass panic. The ravenous Dead increased whilst they systematically attacked the living and converted—within seconds—those living into the Living Dead.

In the distance, hisses and large rumbling bangs were coherent, which nobody had a notion of what they may have been.

It sounded like nuclear strikes in the central US.

This was, in fact, what was occurring.

It was the only way to wipe this infection out, despite killing living folk. It was the only option left to conquer the problem, and end the killing. The infection had to be stopped. There were already news and Pentagon reports that said this virus was already active in other far-off countries around the globe. Nobody knew what started the virus or from where it came. It was just there one morning, turning hard-working folk into flesh-eating lunatics.

When Susan first spotted the two men take the corner, she was busy applying lip gloss in the mirror and rubbing rouge onto her cheeks. Typically, she also checked her teeth, as she rubbed them with her index finger, as if this would whiten them and make them look more Hollywood.

But she stopped when she saw her husband and his buddy. Her beloved Earl was bleeding from the neck profusely and so was Nick, who had a huge chunk of flesh ripped from his upper right shoulder, which currently sprayed blood.

“Oh my God...” she said, her cosmetics falling into her lap. Susan had no clue as to what was happening. She never watched the news reports on TV. She never listened to the radio. Most of today had been spent soaking in a hot bath, and toning up in the gym that she and Earl converted from a spare bedroom. “Oh, my poor Earl...”

It was too late to lock the car doors. Already, Earl and Nick were on-the-ball and two of these tragic Dead were inside the car, reaching out for the screaming, petrified Susan. The poor woman thrashed and flailed her arms and legs and urinated in her shorts. The scent of raw urine excited Earl. It was like the growing, expansive aroma which emerged from the field camp in the background, which was laced with the odour of fresh blood, torn innards and ligaments.

Earl pulled her towards him. His teeth sank into her face as Nick set to work on an arm he captured and began gnawing upon.

It was merely moments before Susan was outside the parked vehicle, groaning in hunger alongside her husband and Nick, seeking a kill of her own. All that love of life had been replaced by sluggishness and laborious movement. She attempted to move faster, yet found she simply could not. Turning her head like a tailor’s dummy, she noticed Earl and Nick were the same and approached this new existence in similar ways. It frustrated the three of them, and yet because their brains were impaired, they barely gave it any thought.

In the distant orange and green sky, the heavy thunder was increasing.

All three of the Dead ones, together with most of the other Dead in the vicinity, stopped in their tracks and stared into the distance, in shock and awe at the glorious sight which unfolded before them across the US. The three of them were agog as they stood and witnessed the monstrosity of the monolithic, expanding mushroom cloud as it developed into a huge magnificent plume. The landscape began to tremor further still. The ground on which they were standing seemed to open

and swallow many folk up. Two seconds later the quake turned more violent, and the soaring heat of the blast intensified and enveloped everybody, Dead and Living. It vaporized each and all present—including Susan, Earl and Nick, and everyone else there.

This was the only way as the virus spread and transformed more and more humans into its likeness. The Earth would suffer, as it had to in order for a new, cleaner generation to rise from its ashes, to face the brand-new world, one with new rules.

Perhaps they'd do a better job this time around.

THE END

[Schlock! Presents: Ghostlands](#)

Ghostlands



A Book of Ghost Stories

[Return to Contents](#)

THE MASTERS by Steven Havelock

Sometime in the future (Date unknown)

"I'm so sorry that we weren't able to save your family when the *Masters* selected them for culling." He saw tears in Clara's eyes. She remembered.

"I survived, Jarik. I was four years old, but I survived. My mother hid me under the bed when the masters came." She remembered them.

Tall and spindly...And silver in colour.

She remembered seeing them from under the bed. They were standing in the entrance to her bedroom, talking in a language that she knew she would never understand.

"I survived," she said simply.

"And now we are going to give these *masters* a lesson they will never forget," replied Jarik.

"And what if...what if something goes wrong?"

"Then we will die together," said Jarik. "We will be together forever and ever."

Jarik smiled.

My one and only true love...

Jarik's phone beeped. He looked at the countdown timer.

Two minutes to go until collision...

Jarik was on a plane. Not any plane but the first plane ever to make an escape attempt.

"No one knows what exists outside the *bubble*; if we make it, we will be the first to find out."

"We will make it; I have 100% faith in this plan," Clara responded.

This is my once in a life time chance of escaping the bubble, Jarik thought.

"I can't believe we are finally going to do it," said Clara.

"I waited years for this moment."

They smiled at each other, and slid their palms into each other's.

"I just hope and pray it works."

“The technologies we managed to scavenge from the ancients have given us an edge, these cell phones and computers.”

He stared at the feed from his mobile phone. Clear blue skies, but within the sky was a tall foreboding grey structure, the Masters’ tower. On the screen, in the distance they saw a small speck of white heading towards the tower.

“Just hope and pray that our plan works,” he said.

Jarik hacked into the *Masters’* news feed.

The plane is nearly on target...

They waited...The plane could be seen clearly...And then...And then Jarik gave a whoop of joy as the plane smashed into the tower.

The deed was done.

“This is our one and only chance, Clara.”

“I know.” She smiled widely.

The captain’s voice came over the speaker system.

“We are diverting course and heading towards the bubble’s exit now. Pray we make it!”

Jarik could sense the fear in his voice, and now his heart was beating faster than he would have liked and his breath rattled from his lungs.

Then the signal went dead, and the phone went blank.

Fifteen Years Earlier

“Papa, who are the masters?” asked Jarik.

“They are the masters. That is all we know them as.” His papa’s eyes had a faraway look; he seemed deep in thought. “They have always been here; no one can remember a time when they were not.”

“But why do they kill us?”

“They believe that culling one family each day will help the planet remain in balance.”

“Papa, what if...what if they want to cull *us* one day?”

“There is nothing we could do to prevent it.” Papa’s voice took on a worn out tired note. “They are our masters.”

Jarik later learnt that there had been many who had tried to resist the *Masters*, but they had been dealt with swiftly and severely.

A few months before The Escape

The day is coming!

Jarik took a glass of water to his elderly father.

He’s not going to last much longer.

Later that night the only member of his family passed away.

He went in his sleep. I hope wherever he is...He is happy...He could not face the ‘masters’ in life, but I hope in death he has the freedom and escape that I know he always secretly yearned for.

Once his dad had been buried, Jarik went back to his secret work...The work he had never told his father about.

This work is so dangerous that if the Masters knew they would not only kill me but everyone within a100 mile radius.

In the privacy of his bedroom, he locked the door and from beneath the bed pulled out a small computer.

Most people don’t even know these exist, let alone, own one.

He switched it on and waited with bated breath as it loaded. Once it was on, he contacted Jacob, the head of the resistance, via an ancient program known as WattsChat.

I am part of the resistance. I have been for the last seven years. No one knows how many resistance fighters there are, not even me.

Jarik’s blood drained from his face and his hair stood on end as he read the email from Jacob on WattsChat.

“Tomorrow is the day. Tomorrow we will send a plane load of resistance fighters outside the bubble.”

Oh my god! No one has ever escaped from the master’s control. No one has ever left the bubble before!

Then he received the message that filled him with joy but also saddened him beyond measure.

“You and Clara will be on the plane.”

“One hundred miles to go!” shouted the pilot of the Boeing 747.

Jarik looked into the sky and couldn’t even see a hint of the *masters’* grey two-meter-long sentinels.

Oh my God! Looks like we going to make it!

Everyone on the plane knew that the attack on the Masters’ tower was intended only as a diversion for these lucky few.

“Fifty miles to go!” screamed the pilot over the intercom. The passengers of the flight gave a loud whoop of joy.

If only my father could see me now. I never told him about my work in the resistance, as I know he wouldn’t have approved.

The pilot looked at the radar. “Holy shit! We got a trace! They’ve seen us. It’s on our tail. There’s no way to outrun it, except...Except to descend at such a fast pace that it won’t be able to follow.”

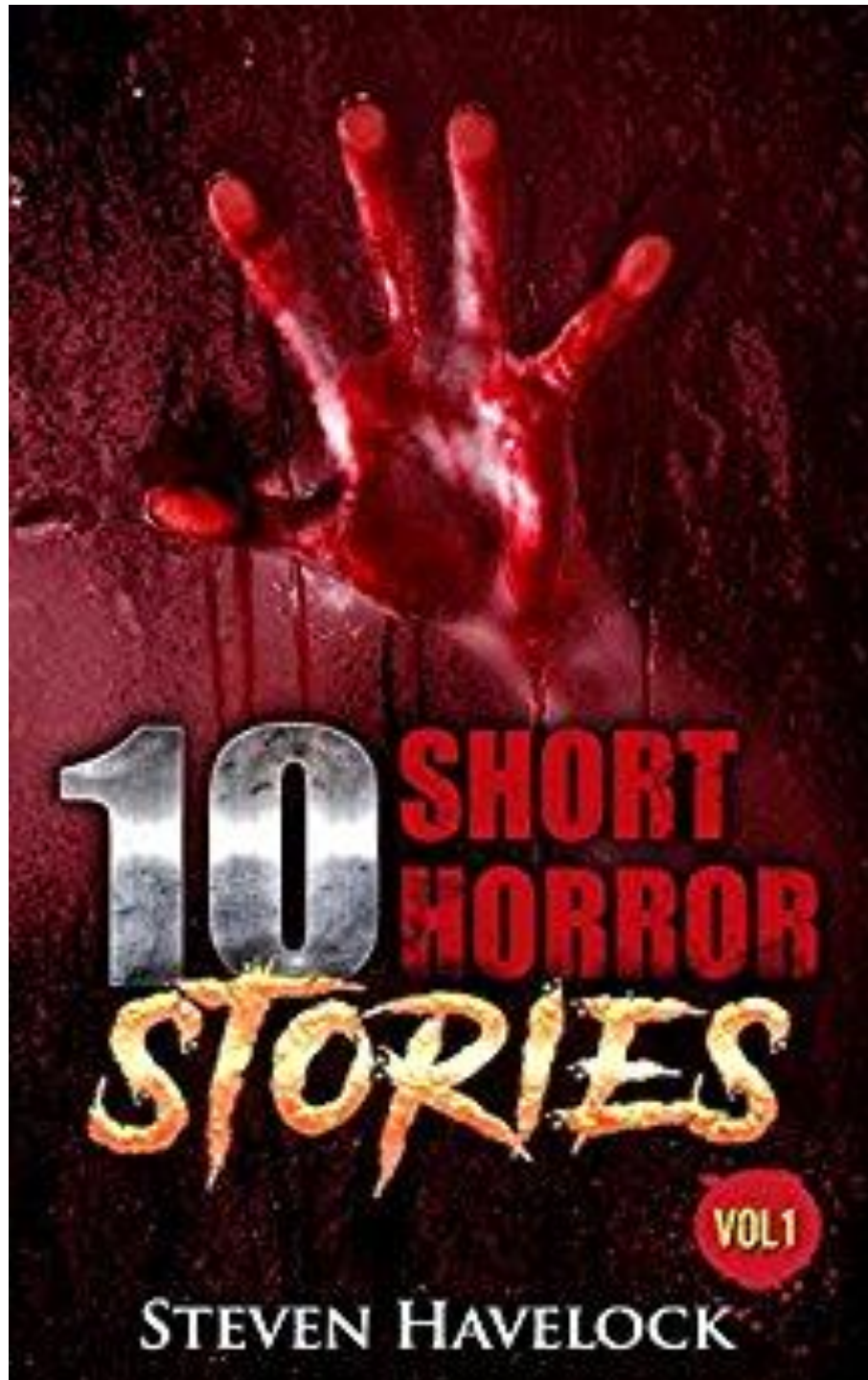
“Guys, strap yourselves in.” The fear in the captain’s voice was palpable. “Hold on! I’m going to give it everything we got!”

The plane started to descend. A cry of fear rose from the passengers.

The plane came closer and closer to the ground...and then...and then...

The captain’s voice came over the speaker system as the plane steadied. “We did it! We are free...Free at last!

THE END



[Return to Contents](#)

REVIEW by John C Adams

Lighthouses: An Anthology of Dark Tales



My first thought upon receiving the review copy of *Lighthouses* from Black Beacon Books was that they had done St Venerius proud: Greg Chapman's brooding cover art certainly caught my eye, and before long I was immersed in the fourteen short stories.

Lincolnshire-based author Steve Cameron's story *To Keep the Lamp Alight* felt very close to home. My son used to work at Humberside Airport, so it was a pleasure to be back in that part of the country again as I turned the pages.

Raymond Talbot, from the Maritime Authority, has disappeared. Since he'd campaigned to close down the town's much-loved lighthouse, everyone in Sculthorpe is a suspect. To narrow it down, retired journalist Frank Millard teams up with Mick Bowen, Sculthorpe's police sergeant. Two city detectives turn up to investigate, and some TV crews come sniffing around. Then an arrest is made. But with the evidence pointing in different directions, have the police got their man?

Australian author Linda Brucesmith's story *The Last Keeper* featured an intriguing opening, which put the point of view of the lighthouse and the nearby cottage centre stage. The tale of lighthouse keeper Samuel, the marine life and the ships sailing nearby is an inclusive story, sensitively reminding us that the ocean and all those who depend upon her are compelling characters in their own right.

Sensing something, a manta ray adjusted the arc of her fins, turned upward through the wet. She broke the surface, looked into the dark for the lighthouse beam, and then, not finding it, stilled and drifted with the turning tide toward the cape.

Cameron Trost's *Horror at Hollow Head* is a tale in the best tradition of quests for treasure, coupled with a satisfyingly dark, tentacled underbelly. Father and son bounty hunters Kevin and Neil Granger arrive in town and masquerade as holidaymakers. They're too confident of their skills to be deterred by reports of local drownings, or by the landslide that blocked the entrance to one of the sea caves a century ago. Before long, the search for Captain Redmond's legendary fortune is on, but not before they've found time to down their ration of the local spiced rum, The Kraken. And all the time, their quarry is luring them in.

The holiday park was at the opposite end of the town from the lighthouse, but that suited them well. It was always best to keep one's target at a safe distance. At eight o'clock, after a light dinner, they walked along the beach. High above them at the far end, the beam of the lighthouse circled through the night sky. It was a warning to unseen ships out at sea, but for Kevin and Neil, it was a beacon drawing them closer.


Whether it's living a mile from the rugged North East coast, or raising a teenager, one way or another there's usually a storm brewing round here. How else would I know the patron saint of lighthouses off the top of my head?

Enjoy!

Lighthouses is out now from Black Beacon Books.

<http://blackbeaconbooks.blogspot.com/p/lighthouses.html>

THE END

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

WINTER 2017-18

Schlock!

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[Return to Contents](#)

THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part One

[Astute readers may be surprised to find Mokem Bet alive again in these pages, after Illara killed him in "The Battle for Callisto". After killing him off so carelessly, the author quickly came to regret squandering a perfectly good villain in Mokem Bet in this thoughtless manner. As he is rewriting "The Battle for Callisto", he will rectify that poor decision, allowing Mokem Bet to live to do much more harm, at least through a good part of "The Search for Astra Palace", if not further than that. Be assured, though, that the author will not deny Illara her rightful kill.]

"Coffee. Black."

The bartender gave Carter Ward a look.

Coffee wasn't a usual order in this place, a cheap and dirty bar dug deep into a remote asteroid on the further fringes of the asteroid belt somewhere beyond the orbit of Jupiter.

Nope, the bartender decided. This guy's in no mood for talking. He's trouble. Bad trouble. Just give him what he wants.

"That'll be a minute," the he said.

"Whatever it takes," Ward answered.

"Sure, buddy."

The bartender turned to the replicator behind him.

In one of the darkened corners of the bar, a hooker with painted eyebrows was working hard, giving out handjobs. He was making good money this shift. A drunken, half-naked man was slowly puking on the rounded floor. Droplets of egg-coloured foam floated in the nearly weightless room. Blood and semen stained the walls. Everything was sticky with the stench of spilled beer and stale vomit.

This asteroid, designated AT-4442-ST in the Earthian directories, was one of the renegade asteroids, a place where smugglers and kidnappers, and others who lived just outside the limits of the law, mingled with the Scroungers, pirates of the asteroids, sometimes freely, sometimes in guarded, whispered conversations.

The bartender spoke to the replicator mounted on the wall behind him, "Gimme a coffee. Black."

The replicator, one of the rusted older models, hummed for a moment, then stopped.

The bartender opened the front panel of the replicator, reached in and pulled from it a hard plastic sippy cup. He handed it off to Ward.

“Thanks,” Ward said, unsmiling. He tapped his wristband to the scanner next to his elbow, transferring twenty-five Universal Credits to the bar, and giving the bartender a substantial tip.

“Thanks,” said the bartender.

Ward nodded, took the sippy cup in one hand, then pushed himself off to a booth in a darkened corner. It was empty.

The booth gave him a good view of the entire bar, and all the people within it. He could see everyone who came in, everyone who left, and everyone who stayed.

The bartender was right.

Ward was not in any good mood. Never a very sociable man, even in the happiest times, Ward wasn't looking for conversation.

He was looking for a man. Two men. To kill them.

Turhan Mot and Mokem Bet. That was their names.

Turhan Mot was the leader of a particularly vicious band of Scroungers. The Scroungers, as they were called, were the pirates of the asteroid belt.

Carter Ward's first run-in with Turhan Mot happened when the space pirate had launched his attack against the Interplanetary Space Station 3, the IPS-3. That was the first time any of the interplanetary stations had ever been attacked by anyone, even by the Scroungers.

After that, Turhan Mot, with the assistance of Horst Dal and Yamir, two men closely aligned with the Scroungers, launched an attack against the bases of the moons of the Jovian system, Callisto, Europa and Ganymede, and even including the scientific stations on the innermost Galilean satellite, Io.

Both times, Ward had been able to throw the proverbial monkey wrench into Turhan Mot's plots. In the first case he did so by destroying the solar sails that caused the IPS-3 to spin, which gave the station its artificial gravity.

In the chaos that followed, Ward, and the others who flew with him on his small transport ship, the O8-111A, bound for Callisto, were able to thwart the attackers.

Again, at Callisto, Ward and his friend, a smuggler who called himself `Mud', were able to fly their ships, the O8-111A, and the “Charon”, which belonged to Mud, directly into the landing bay of Turhan Mot's transport, the “Grand Marquis”.

There, the two of them were able to destroy the landing bay of Turhan Mot's ship, killing most of his crew, and making it impossible for Turhan Mot's ships to depart or land. Ward and Mud had very nearly captured Turhan Mot himself, who only barely eluded them in a tiny escape pod launched from the command deck of the "Grand Marquis".

That one manoeuvre, bringing their ships into the landing bay of the "Grand Marquis" was enough to end Turhan Mot's campaign against Callisto.

So Turhan Mot had every reason to despise Ward as much as Ward did him.

But in the battle that followed Turhan Mot's attack against Callisto, there was a girl named Emily, Emily Sherman, who was most grievously wounded. She was left in a coma from which there was no hope that she would ever recover.

Emily, a girl of but eleven Earth years, was one of the people Carter Ward had transported from Mars to Callisto, along with her father, Frederick Sherman, III, her mother, Joyce, and her older brother, Jeffrey.

Emily was also the only person, aside from Illara, the woman who had prodded Carter Ward to carry her friends to Callisto, who had ever touched the cold, leaden and dead thing that weighed heavy in Ward's chest, his heart.

Carter Ward had already sworn to himself that he would kill Turhan Mot and Mokem Bet, who had insulted Emily and Illara, there on the Interplanetary Station 3.

But when, after the battle for Callisto, he saw Emily lying on a hospital gurney, like a corpse, all unconscious, that brief flickering of life that she had sparked in him went dark, darker than ever before, like a candle extinguished in the blackest of all possible nights.

It left behind it nothing but a cold rage.

The only thing that Carter Ward lived for now was the death of that soulless fucker, Turhan Mot. He would take that prick out of this world where children like Emily lived. And that rat bastard, Mokem Bet, the one who, he learned from Illara, made a threat against that Emily that no child should ever hear.

But whether Carter Ward was searching the asteroid belt for these men to wreak a bloody vengeance upon those who would so coldly harm an innocent, or only in a selfish quest to kill the fuckers who had so brutally snuffed out the only light he'd ever allowed himself to see, no one could possibly say.

Carter Ward was himself a simple, cold-blooded bastard of a killer. Cut largely of the same cloth as Turhan Mot and Mokem Bet, Ward was a man with no family, no mother, no father, no brother or sister. Now, a man in his middle forties, as measured by Earth years, Ward had killed over two hundred men with his own hands. Laser pistol, knife, bayonet, strangulation, shattered skull, he had mastered them all. He never regretted a single kill. And he was perfectly willing to

kill another two hundred, if any of them got in his way. Killing was no more a thing to him than crushing a cockroach scurrying in her kitchen underfoot was to a housewife.

But with Emily now in a coma, the universe was again for Ward what it always had been since he was but a child himself, only but an ugly place of endless misery. Whatever was good in it was quickly and easily stamped out by the cruellest, the most selfish, and the most greedy. It was they who determined what was good and what was bad. The assholes, the ones who got a kick out of slapping the weak. They were the arbiters of justice, and the bigger the asshole, the more the arbiter of justice he claimed to be.

And there was nothing a man could do about any of it, except to be the most cold-blooded, throat-cutting bastard of them all.

And it was for that reason that Carter Ward chose to live alone. He, what they called a `space rat`, lived his life wandering between the planets, travelling endlessly from asteroid to asteroid, smuggling whatever it took to keep his ship, the O8-111A, running. Drugs, weapons, illegal ordnance, whatever else it took for him to just stay the fucking hell away from every other living human thing.

Just let him alone, and he won't bother anyone.

Ward had been flying from one asteroid to another in the farthest reaches of the asteroid belt, searching for any rumour of Turhan Mot. But Turhan Mot had made himself disappear most effectively. Not a rumour. Not a word. This pit of a bar was only one of dozens Ward had come to. There were hundreds more out here for Ward to search.

From the side of his eye, he carefully studied three Scroungers who sat at a booth not far from where he sat, their feet in stirrups to hold them in place. They were unguarded here. Talking loudly, laughing occasionally and rudely, but otherwise not making any trouble. Ward listened in on their conversation. So far, nothing. They had said not word about Callisto.

"Hiya, good lookin'. Handjob? Can I suck ya off?"

Ward was shaken instantly out of his mood. He looked at the woman who smiled down at him. She wore only a tight sequined thong, purple, with gold tassels. A glittery wig and a hugely painted smile. Nice tits. She loved her work, Ward saw. He warmed up to her. He liked his women hard, for the most part. Show `em a good time, pay `em off, and the business was done.

Illara was different, of course. But that was another story.

"Nah," he said to the hooker, raising his wristband toward hers.

She tapped her wristband against Ward's, checked the amount he had transferred to her and raised her eyebrows at the generous tip he gave her for nothing.

"Maybe a boy? That whatcha want?" she asked, with a pretty laugh. "That whatcha lookin' for?"

“Nah. Just wanna be left alone, is all,” Ward said. “`less you got something to say, maybe I wanna hear.”

The hooker settled into the booth with Ward, raised her naked legs and laid them on his lap. With the tip he had given her, she could take it easy for the rest of her shift. She tickled his belly with expert toes.

“So,” she asked in a flirty tone, “Whatcha wanna talk about?”

“Dunno,” Ward shrugged.

Ward was a good-looking man, the girl decided. That he didn’t want to buy a hand job from her made him that much more attractive. The tip was juicy, and her hand was tired. If he just wanted to sit and listen to her blather on, well, he already paid for it, didn’t he? That he was something nice to look at made it easier, didn’t it? Ward was someone for her to close her eyes and think about when she was sucking off some ugly-ass grunt for twenty Universal Credits.

“I got gossip comin’ outta every hole in my body,” she laughed, grinning with a too-painted smile. Lipstick was smeared across her cheeks.

Ward liked the look. Reminded him of some of his first girlfriends.

Ward lightened, slightly. He liked this girl. Honest. She was what she was.

“I dunno,” Ward said. “Just movin’ `round, tryin’ to stay outta trouble.”

“Then why’d ya come here? the girl asked with a laugh. “Nothin’ but trouble here.”

Ward pretended to laugh in reply.

“Ha,” he snorted. “Yeah, I s’pose. Nothin’ but trouble everywhere.”

“Yeah, sure is, sweetie,” she said. “I guess you must `a heard about Jupiter, huh?”

“Yeh,” Ward answered.

“Yeah, sure, wowie!” the girl said. “Everybody’s talkin’ about it. Were you there?”

“Like I said, I try to stay away from trouble,” Ward said, smoothly avoiding her question.

“Oh yeh, I just asked cuz it seems like everybody was there. Ya ask ennybody, and they’re all like (the girl swelled out her chest with a swagger and deepened her voice, giving it a delightfully and silly masculine tenor), ‘Oh yeh, I was there, killed me `about a hunnerd’.”

Ward couldn’t help but let himself smile. The girl, happy to get that smile from Ward, opened up

and began babbling happily. The words came pouring from her, and Ward quickly concluded that she knew nothing special about the attack. He let her babble on.

Why not? You never know where these random conversations might lead. Ward, keeping half an eye on the Scroungers sitting a booth away, had already noticed that they had perked up their ears, hearing which way the conversation had turned.

Besides, letting the young hooker babble away at him gave Ward cover. He wasn't nearly as conspicuous now as he would have been, sitting alone. He could watch everyone, and should any stray glances come his way, they'd be distracted by the girl's generous breasts.

And they came and went, the seedy customers to this seedy bar. Singly, in groups, they came to get drunk, meet up with friends, cut some shady deals, and leave. This bar, which had no name, and was just 'Ed's place', where Ed had informally set up to sell drinks and drugs, and make a few UCs.

And the girl chattered on. She had warmed up to Ward. He was nice. He listened to her, even if she wasn't saying anything important.

She was just then deciding whether to risk hold out her hand and say 'By the way, my name is Lacey, what's yours?' when a stranger pushed his way through the now very crowded bar, and pulled himself up to the booth.

Gripping the table with both hands, he gave her a dirty scowl and sneered, "Beat it, bitch,".

Lacey's face dropped. She turned to look at Ward. Ward's face was a stolid mask. He said nothing.

"Are ya deaf?" the stranger demanded, raising his voice. He shoved his face closer to Lacey's.

Ward's hand dropped under the table.

Lacey scooted out of the booth. The stranger moved aside to give her space to leave. When she did, giving Ward a lingering and worried backward glance, the stranger settled into the place she had vacated.

Ward did not move.

The stranger glowered at Ward for a moment.

"We're going for a ride," the stranger finally said.

Ward still said nothing.

"That's right," the stranger said. "Don't say nothin'. Nothin' you can do. My buddies and me, we got ya. Yeah, that's them, at the door. See them?"

Ward turned his head. Two very unpleasant looking men held a position at either side of the only door that led into the bar. They held onto grips built into the wall to keep from drifting out of place.

(“That’s three of `em,” Ward counted, to himself.)

The stranger leaned in toward Ward. His teeth were gold. Three of them were pierced with rubies. Tattoos on his fingers.

“You’re worth a lotta money, man,” the stranger gloated. “Yeah. My friends at the Hole got a bounty out on the guy who flies that ship, the O8-111A. And we seen that ship in the dock, and here you are. So you’re gonna get up an’ come with us. Get it?”

Ward had heard all he needed to hear. So that was it. The bounty on his head. From that business at that casino, The Hole, on the asteroid, Vesta. Ward had liberated a girl, Alyshia, from the gangsters who ran the place. Along the way, he’d killed five of them.

And now this punk was going to haul him back to The Hole, to have him skinned alive.

Ward didn’t need to hear any more.

He fired his laser pistol once from under the table. The blast from it burned a hole in the stranger’s belly. That first shot shut him up. A second shot caused his head to burst open. Without pausing, Ward swung his pistol to the right. Before the two thugs at the door had a chance to unholster their weapons, Ward took their heads off with two more well placed shots.

Their bodies jerked about in dying spasms. They floated about, their dead hands still gripping the handholds at the door.

A woman screamed. Everyone in the bar stared at Ward. Lacey, her eyes huge, stared with them.

Ward released his feet from the stirrups that held him in place at the booth. He slipped his pistol back into its holster, and picked up the sippy cup that held his now cold coffee. He drained it, then pushed himself toward the bar where the bartender, Ed, was still serving drinks.

Ward handed the sippy cup to the bartender.

“Sorry,” he said.

He raised his wrist and offered his wristband to Ed. Ed touched his wristband to Ward’s. With that gesture, Ward transferred several thousand Universal Credit—from the payment he had earned for his services under Colonel Westland at the battle for Callisto—to the bartender.

Ed, the bartender, only stared at Ward.

“Thanks,” was all he said.

Ward turned and pushed himself through the crowd toward the door, where the bodies of the two thugs were still drifting, the stench of their charred flesh filling the room.

Ward passed Lacey on his way out the door.

She stared at him still, chin trembling.

“Sorry about that,” Ward said with a chivalry unusual for him.

Lacey nodded her head.

“Uh-huh,” was all she was able to say.

Ward pushed himself through the door and disappeared.

Lacey never saw him again. She never forgot him, either.

Returning to his ship, the O8-111A, where it was docked, Ward was about to open the hatch at the stern when he remembered. Dimara, his quantum-based companion, had warned him after they’d left Callisto that Ward’s old friend, Mud, had placed a tracer on his ship. Yeah, that was just like Mud. Gonna keep an eye on Ward.

Ward had let it slip his mind many times, but now, at last, he happened to remember it when he could do something about it. So before he climbed back into his ship, he stepped around to the stern where he found the tracer lodged between two of the ship’s thrusters. He yanked the tracer from his ship, and looked around for another place to lodge it. He found it quickly, a swift transport ship, an older model, run down, suggesting that the owners of it were hardly rich.

As Ward was placing the tracer on the side of the transport, he heard the sounds of people approaching through the nearly deserted landing bay. Alert, he turned back to his ship, the O8-111A, and prepared to open the rear hatch to board.

“Heya, chum,” he heard called out at him from behind.

Holding to the hand grip next to the hatch, Ward swung himself about to face the challenge. It was the three Scroungers he saw sitting at a booth near to his, back at Ed’s bar.

In the nearly weightless environment of the tunnels gouged into the asteroid, Ward and the Scroungers following him floated through the air. The Scroungers were grinning. None of them had pulled their pistols from their holsters. A good sign. But still. They’d heard the nitwad Ward had killed bragging about the bounty on Ward’s head. So there was no telling what these guys were looking for. He let his right-hand drift toward the laser pistol he carried in the holster

strapped to the belt at his waist.

“Yeah?” Ward grunted.

The Scroungers laughed, good-naturedly. Heads shaved, Ward recognized the whorls tattooed on their cheeks. They were members of a band that regularly terrorized shippers between Eros and Vesta.

“Settle yer doggies, there, bud,” said one, a man with metal spikes implanted in his skull. They were sharp, laid out in two rows, on the top of his head. Each one about three inches long. His jumpsuit was plain and black. Two pistols worn on straps that wrapped about his chest and waist.

“We’re not lookin’ for any bounty on ya, friend,” he explained, still grinning. “If we wuz, we’d a jumped yuh from behind. You’re good with yer gun.”

He pulled up, and stopped, well out of the reach of Ward’s fists. Ward recognized the respectful gesture for what it was. It was intended to be as unthreatening as a Scrounger was capable of showing himself to be. The Scrounger’s two companions pulled themselves to a stop behind the first, keeping their place subordinate to the one who had spoken.

“Whatever that fellah wanted, we got better game,” the Scrounger explained.

Ward grunted and nodded his head, indicating that he was willing to listen.

“So finish up yer business,” the Scrounger said, leaning in with his chin to indicate the tracer Ward still held in his hand.

“We just wanna talk, is all.”

“Awrite,” Ward grunted. He turned half away from the three Scroungers—itsself a gesture, showing his willingness to take the men at their word, that they would not jump him when his guard was down, and he finished placing the tracer on the ship. Mud was always wanting to baby-sit him. With luck, this ship would pull out into space before Mud got there, and he’d be following a false trail while Ward went on his way, whichever way that happened to be.

Placing the tracer on the ship also gave Ward a moment to swallow down his deep hatred of every Scrounger who had ever been born, before he turned back to them to hear what they had to say.

He turned back to the three men with a shrug, and asked, “Whatcha hot shots wanna talk about?”

“You handled y’self real good back there. Real good,” the Scrounger grinned.

Ward recognized that the grin was meant to be a friendly smile, but it was a smile to put terror into the heart of any civilized man or woman.

“Mebbe yuh wanna hook up with us.”

Ward gave the three men a long, uninterested look. The other two men were also dressed in black jumpsuits. The plain jumpsuits should have indicated that they were unattached to any bands within the Scroungers, but the faded tattoos on their faces showed that they belonged, or had once belonged, to a tight group called the `Devil Dogs`.

“Left `em, or got kicked out, whichever,” Ward concluded to himself. He didn’t ask, of course. None of his business, and he didn’t care.

“I’m not much the joinin’ kind,” Ward said.

“We’re not lookin’ for you to join up with us, nuthin’ permanent,” the Scrounger answered.

“We’re on a job. And I figure we could maybe use yer gun, if yuh got it up fer sale.”

Ward studied the Scrounger closely for a long moment. The Scrounger returned his stare. Neither blinked.

“Dunno,” Ward said, carefully. “That would depend on the job. Maybe I got business of my own.”

“Yeah,” the Scrounger answered, coolly. “I expect maybe you would.”

“So maybe I wouldn’t have a lotta time...” Ward said, leaving the statement unfinished.

“Nah, I expect so,” the Scrounger said. “Lemme tell yuh what it is, and you can lemme know if you got the time.”

“Awrite,” Ward said.

“Yuh heard about Callisto. Lacey was tellin’ yuh all about whut she knew.”

“Yeah.”

“But whut she knows idn’t squat. Just a buncha joy boys braggin’ on her, maybe get a free suck job from her.”

“Yeah, I figured,” Ward said.

“Yeh. I didn’t figger you to be stupid. Lacey idn’t either,” the Scrounger put in with a short laugh. “She don’t give it out for free. So maybe you heard about them two big guys, started it all?”

“I heard what I heard,” Ward said.

“These two hotshots, Turhan Mot and his suck up, a fuckhead called Mokem Bet, they wus the guys talked the big money into bankin’ it. Thought they hadda plan, was gunna make a big score, real big.”

The Scrounger paused just half a moment to see how Ward would react to the names. Ward didn’t react, so the Scrounger continued.

“A lotta people put money of them two, on account they made big noise, once.”

“Yeah?” Ward asked.

He kept his face rigid.

“Turhan Mot, his ship was the “Grand Marquis”. Heard of it?”

“Might have, yeah,” Ward answered.

“Big ship. Terror to them deep space shippers. Ate `em up. Yeah. So Turhan Mot figures he’d do better. Went after the space stations, then figgered he’d start hitting the bases. Talked a lot people into it.”

“Yeh,” Ward nodded.

The Scrounger grinned.

“Shit went south on them guys. Big time. Nobody knows what the shit was. Turhan Mot blew his wad quick, then ducked.”

“Yeh?” Ward grunted.

“Yeah. Just ducked out. Left Yamir there to do the shootin’ himself. And the other guys, free agents, hooked up on the job. Got themselves killed, instead.

“So the boys who backed Turhan Mot. They want him back. Bad. Real bad.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Ward said.

“Yup. There’s money out for them guys. Big money. Bring `em in, and it’s payday.”

“Yeah, I see,” said Ward.

“So we’re looking to make us some money.”

“Yer huntin’ Turhan Mot.”

“And Mokem Bet, too. Both of them jokers.”

“Awrite,” Ward said. He left the word hanging in the air.

“Yeh. We saw you handle yerself back there at Ed’s. You play it cool, jack. I like that. And maybe we could use your gun. Everything I hear, and my boys, too (he half turned and made a gesture with his hand to indicate the two Scroungers following him) is Turhan Mot is bad news. He might `a gimped out on Callisto, but word around the playground is he knows how to handle himself. Cool as an iceburger himself.”

“Yeah, I guess I might `a heard that, myself.

“So, yuh wanna think about hookin’ up with us?

Ward’s face was a mask. He despised the Scroungers. All of them. He would have thought nothing of gunning all three down, now, just on general principles.

“I never run with Scroungers before,” Ward said.

The Scrounger eyed Ward’s ship. Ward noted he paid particular attention to the large call letters painted on its side. O8-111A, they read.

“Yuh headin’ out?” the Scrounger asked him.

Ward nodded.

“So maybe we can’t talk yuh into runnin’ with us, for this job?”

“Gotta think about it. Can’t be using up all my time on a wild goose chase.”

The Scrounger grinned broadly.

“Might be we got word, good word, on where he’s holin’ himself up.”

“Yeh, you and maybe around a million other guys.”

The Scrounger chuckled.

“Yeh. Alla them. But we got word from the ass who’s hidin’ `em.”

Ward did not respond. His face was impassive. But the Scrounger had his attention.

“How d’ya know this guy’s not shittin’ yah?” Ward asked.

The Scrounger smirked.

“I know this guy from way back. He’s good for his word.”

“So, if he’s holin’ Turhan Mot up, why’s he so keen to rat the bastard out?”

“These guys aren’t buddies.” said the Scrounger with a laugh. “My bud is holin’ this fucker, just to make some ducats, that’s all. And if the cash is good, my bud will sell Turhan Mot to anyone who wants to buy.”

Ward scowled, studying the Scrounger for a long and silent moment. Was this asshole yanking him, or what? What is his deal, anyway? Why’s he so quick to cut Ward in on his deal? He’s good with a gun? So the fuck what? There are a helluva lotta good guns, out here in the wilds beyond Jupiter.

He finally broke the silence by asking those very questions, in his notoriously succinct way.

“So I got a gun,” he shrugged. “So whut? Must be a couple thousand guns on this asteroid, alla them as good as me.”

“I know my guns,” the Scrounger said with a broad grin shining through his taut purple lips.

“And yer good. Better’n most. Yer just the backup we’ll need, pickin’ up Turhan Mot”

Ward scowled, thinking hard. It might be a load of bullshit, what the Scrounger was this Scrounger was handing him. But it was also the first real clue he had come across of Turhan Mot’s possible location.

He opened the hatch of his ship, and paused.

“Lemme think about it,” he said to the Scrounger. “I’ll sleep on it an’ let ya know,”

“Fair enough,” the Scrounger grinned. “We gonna find ya here? On yer ship?”

“I’ll find you,” Ward answered. “You guys all gonna hang here for a time?”

“Tell ya whut. We’ll hang till we hear from ya. Then we’re off.”

“Awrite,” Ward answered. “Yuh’ll be hearing from me.”

He turned and disappeared into his ship. The hatch closed behind him, and the Scroungers were left standing outside.

They, for their part, left Ward’s ship, and made their way back to Ed’s bar where they found their booth still empty. The bar was crowded, the corpses of the three men had been cleared out, but the blood from the very brief battle had stained the leather of the booth, and so the patrons who had come in stayed instinctively away.

They ordered their drinks from a replicator on the table. It dispensed three heavy beers.

“You think he’s the guy?” one of the Scroungers asked of the man who had done all the talking with Ward, while sucking down on the beer he gripped in his tattooed hands.

“Dunno,” the other Scrounger grunted, scowling at the table.

“But that was the number on his ship. That’s the number we’re lookin’ out for.”

“Whyncha just ask him his name, huh?”

The Scrounger spat out a mouthful of beer at the table, with a snort of contempt for the question.

“Sput!” the sound came from his mouth. He wiped the beer away with the palm of his hand.

“And what fuck would that get done, huh? Asshole’s not gunna tell us his name, any more’n we’re gonna tell him ours. It’d just get him more suspicious than he already is.”

“So wadda we do, eh?”

“Wait and see. The man says he’ll think about it, and let us know.”

“Whut if he’s stallin’ us?”

“We’ll get him. One way or another, we’ll get `im.”

“Yuh sure?”

“Oh yeah, I’m sure. Real sure.”

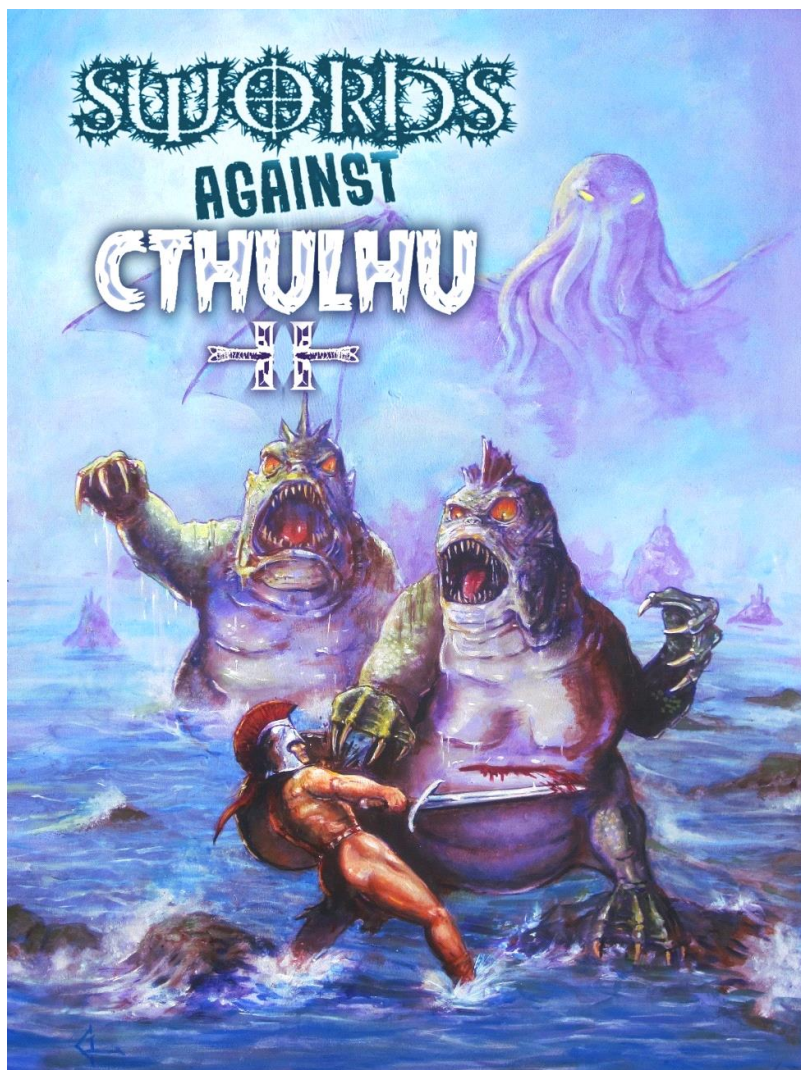
“Yeah? Why’re you so sure?”

“Look, if this guy is Carter Ward, which I’m purty sure he is, he hates Turhan Mot ever’ bit as much as Turhan Mot hates him. And Carter Ward is ever’ bit as cold blooded a bastard as Turhan Mot. Nothin’ motivates a fucker like that more’n hate, and revenge. So danglin’ Mot and Mokem Bet in front of him is as sure a way to get him hooked as any bait I can think of.”

“Yeah? So?”

“And my old friend, Turhan Mot, is gonna be real happy when I hand him Carter Ward.”

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



[Return to Contents](#)

ACROSS THE ZODIAC by Percy Greg

Chapter VII—Escort Duty.

Immediately after breakfast the next morning my host invited me to the gate of his garden, where stood one of the carriages I had seen before in the distance, but never had an opportunity of examining. It rested on three wheels, the two hind ones by far larger than that in front, which merely served to sustain the equilibrium of the body and to steer. The material was the silver-like metal of which most Martial vessels and furniture are formed, every spar, pole, and cross-piece being a hollow cylinder; a construction which, with the extreme lightness of the metal itself, made the carriage far lighter than any I had seen on Earth. The body consisted of a seat with sides, back, and footboard, wide enough to accommodate two persons with ease. It was attached by strong elastic fastenings to a frame consisting of four light poles rising from the framework in which the axles turned; completely dispensing with the trouble of springs, while affording a more complete protection from anything like jolting. The steering gear consisted of a helm attached to the front wheel and coming up within easy reach of the driver's hand. The electric motive power and machinery were concealed in a box beneath the seat, which was indeed but the top of this most important and largest portion of the carriage. The poles sustained a light framework supporting a canopy, which could be drawn over the top and around three sides of the carriage, leaving only the front open. This canopy, in the present instance, consisted of a sort of very fine silken material, thickly embroidered within and without with feathers of various colours and sizes, combined in patterns of exquisite beauty. My host requested me to mount the carriage with him, and drove for some distance, teaching me how to steer, and how, by pressing a spring, to stop or slacken the motion of the vehicle, also how to direct it over rough ground and up or down the steepest slope on which it was available. When we returned, the Regent's carriage was standing by the gate, and two others were waiting at a little distance in the rear. The Regent, with a companion, was already seated, and as soon as we reached the gate, Eveena appeared. She was enveloped from head to foot in a cloak of something like swans-down covering her whole figure, loose, like the ordinary outer garments of both sexes, and gathered in at the waist by a narrow zone of silver, with a sort of clasp of some bright green jewel; and a veil of white satin-looking material covered the whole head and face, and fell half-way to the waist. Her gloved right hand was hidden by the sleeve of her cloak; that of the left arm was turned back, and the hand which she gave me as I handed her to the seat on my left was bare—a usage both of convenience and courtesy. At Esmo's request, the Regent, who led the way, started at a moderate pace, not exceeding some ten miles an hour. I observed that on the roofs of all the houses along the road the inhabitants had gathered to watch us; and as my companion was so completely veiled, I did not baulk their curiosity by drawing the canopy. I presently noticed that the girl held something concealed in her right sleeve, and ventured to ask her what she had there.

"Pardon me," she said; "if we had been less hurried, I meant to have asked your permission to bring my pet esvè with me." Drawing back her sleeve, she showed a bird about the size of a carrier-pigeon, but with an even larger and stronger beak, white body, and wings and tail, like some of the plumage of the head and neck, tinted with gold and green. Around its neck was a little string of silver, and suspended from this a small tablet with a pencil or style. Since by her look and manner she seemed to expect an answer, I said—

“I am very glad you have given me the opportunity of making acquaintance with another of those curiously tame and manageable animals which your people seem to train to such wonderful intelligence and obedience. We have birds on Earth which will carry a letter from a strange place to their home, but only homewards.”

“These,” she answered, “will go wherever they are directed, if they have been there before and know the name of the place; and if this bird had been let loose after we had left, he would have found me, if not hidden by trees or other shelter, anywhere within a score of miles.”

“And have your people,” I asked, “many more such wonderfully intelligent and useful creatures tamed to your service, besides the ambau, the tyree, and these letter-carriers?”

“Oh yes!” she answered. “Nearly all our domestic animals will do anything they are told which lies within their power. You have seen the tyree marching in a line across a field to pick up every single worm or insect, or egg of such, within the whole space over which they move, and I think you saw the ambau gathering fruit. It is not very usual to employ the latter for this purpose, except in the trees. Have you not seen a big creature—I should call it a bird, but a bird that cannot fly, and is covered with coarse hair instead of feathers? It is about as tall as myself, but with a neck half as long as its body, and a very sharp powerful beak; and four of these carvee would clear a field the size of our garden (some 160 acres) of weeds in a couple of days. We can send them, moreover, with orders to fetch a certain number of any particular fruit or plant, and they scarcely ever forget or blunder. Some of them, of course, are cleverer than others. The cleverest will remember the name of every plant in the garden, and will, perhaps, bring four or even six different kinds at a time; but generally we show them a leaf of the plant we want, or point out to them the bed where it is to be found, and do not trouble their memory with more than two different orders at a time. The Unicorns, as you call them, come regularly to be milked at sunset, and, if told beforehand, will come an hour earlier or later to any place pointed out to them. There were many beasts of burden before the electric carriages were invented, so intelligent that I have heard the rider never troubled himself to guide them except when he changed his purpose, or came to a road they had not traversed before. He would simply tell them where to go, and they would carry him safely. The only creature now kept for this purpose is the largest of our birds (the caldecta), about six feet long from head to tail, and with wings measuring thrice as much from tip to tip. They will sail through the air and carry their rider up to places otherwise inaccessible. But they are little used except by the hunters, partly because the danger is thought too great, partly because they cannot rise more than about 4000 feet from the sea-level with a rider, and within that height there are few places worth reaching that cannot be reached more safely. People used to harness them to balloons till we found means to drive these by electricity—the last great invention in the way of locomotion, which I think was completed within my grandfather’s memory.”

“And,” I asked, “have you no animals employed in actually cultivating the soil?”

“No,” she replied, “except the weeding birds of whom I have told you. When we have a piece of ground too small for our electric ploughs, we sometimes set them to break it up, and they certainly reduce the soil to a powder much finer than that produced by the machine.”

“I should like to see those machines at work.”

“Well,” answered Eveena, “I have no doubt we shall pass more than one of them on our way.”

As she said this we reached the great road I had crossed on my arrival, and turning up this for a short distance, sufficient, however, to let me perceive that it led to the seaport town of which I have spoken, we came to a break in the central footpath, just wide enough to allow us to pass. Looking back on this occasion, I observed that we were followed by the two other carriages I have mentioned, but at some distance. We then proceeded up the mountain by a narrow road I had not seen in descending it. On either side of this lay fields of the kind already described, one of which was in course of cultivation, and here I saw the ploughs of which my companion had spoken. Evidently constructed on the same principle as the carriages, but of much greater size, and with heavier and broader wheels, they tore up and broke to pieces a breadth of soil of some two yards, working to a depth of some eighteen inches, with a dozen sharp powerful triangular shares, and proceeding at a rate of about fifty yards per minute. Eveena explained that these fields were generally from 200 to 600 yards square. The machine having traversed the whole field in one direction, then recommenced its work, ploughing at right angles to the former, and carrying behind it a sort of harrow, consisting of hooks supported by light, hollow, metallic poles fixed at a certain angle to the bar forming the rearward extremity of the plough, by which the surface was levelled and the soil beaten into small fragments; broken up, in fact, as I had seen, not less completely than ordinary garden soil in England or Flanders. When it reached the end of its course, the plough had to be turned; and this duty required the employment of two men, one at each end of the field, who, however, had no other or more difficult labour than that of turning the machine at the completion of each set of furrows. In another field, already doubly ploughed, a sowing machine was at work. The large seeds were placed singly by means of an instrument resembling a magnified ovipositor, such as that possessed by many insects, which at regulated intervals made a hole in the ground and deposited a seed therein. Eveena explained that where the seed and plant were small, a continuous stream was poured into a small furrow made by a different instrument attached to the same machine, while another arm, placed a little to the rear, covered in the furrow and smoothed the surface. In reply to another question of mine— “There are,” she said, “some score of different wool or hair bearing animals, which are shorn twice in the year, immediately after the rains, and furnish the fibre which is woven into most of the materials we use for dress and other household purposes. These creatures adapt themselves to the shearing machines with wonderful equanimity and willingness, so that they are seldom or never injured.”

“Not even,” I asked, “by inexperienced or clumsy hands?”

“Hands,” she said, “have nothing to do with the matter. They have only to send the animal into the machine, and, indeed, each goes in of his own accord as he sees his fellow come out.”

“And have you no vegetable fibres,” I said, “that are used for weaving?”

“Oh yes,” she answered, “several. The outer dress I wear indoors is made of a fibre found inside the rind of the fruit of the algyro tree, and the stalks of three or four different kinds of plants afford materials almost equally soft and fine.”

“And your cloak,” I asked, “is not that made of the skin of some animal?”

“Yes,” she replied, “and the most curious creature I have heard of. It is found only in the northern and southern Arctic land-belts, to which indeed nearly all wild animals, except the few small ones that are encouraged because they prey upon large and noxious insects, are now confined. It is about as large as the Unicorns, and has, like them, four limbs; but otherwise it more resembles a bird. It has a bird’s long slight neck, but a very small and not very bird-like head, with a long horny snout, furnished with teeth, something between a beak and a mouth. Its hind limbs are those of a bird, except that they have more flesh upon the lowest joints and are covered with this soft down. Its front limbs, my father says, seem as if nature had hesitated between wings and arms. They have attached to them several long, sharp, featherless quills starting from a shrivelled membrane, which make them very powerful and formidable weapons, so that no animal likes to attack it; while the foot has four fingers or claws with, which it clasps fish or small dragons, especially those electric dragons of which you have seen a tame and very much enlarged specimen, and so holds them that they cannot find a chance of delivering their electric shock. But for the Thernee these dragons, winged as they are, would make those lands hardly habitable either for man, or other beasts. All our furs are obtained from those countries, and the creatures from which they are derived are carefully preserved for that purpose, it being forbidden to kill more than a certain number of each every year, which makes these skins by far the costliest articles we use.”

By this time we had reached the utmost point to which the carriages could take us, about a furlong from the platform on which I had rested during my descent. Seeing that the Regent and his companion had dismounted, I stopped and sprang down from my carriage, holding out my hand to assist Eveena’s descent, an attention which I thought seemed to surprise her. Up to the platform the path was easy enough; after that it became steep even for me, and certainly a troublesome and difficult ascent for a lady dressed as I have described, and hardly stronger than a child of the same height and size on earth. Still my companion did not seem to expect, and certainly did not invite assistance. That she found no little difficulty in the walk was evident from her turning back both sleeves and releasing her bird, which hovered closely round her. Very soon her embarrassments and stumbles threatened such actual danger as overcame my fear of committing what, for aught I knew, might be an intrusion. Catching her as she fell, and raising her by the left hand, I held it fast in my own right, begging to be permitted to assist her for the rest of the journey. Her manner and the tone of her voice made it evident that such an attention, if unusual, was not offensive; but I observed that those who were following us looked at us with some little surprise, and spoke together in words which I could not catch, but the tone of which was not exactly pleasant or complimentary. The Regent, a few steps in advance of us, turned back from time to time to ask me some trivial question. At last we reached the summit, and here I released my companion’s hand and stepped forward a pace or two to point out to the Regent the external structure of the Astronaut. I was near enough, of course, to be heard by Eveena, and endeavoured to address my explanations as much to her as to the authority to whom I was required to render an account. But from the moment that we had actually joined him she withdrew from all part and all apparent interest in the conversation. When our companions moved forward to reach the entrance, which I had indicated, I again offered my hand, saying, “I am afraid you will find some little difficulty in getting into the vessel by the window by which I

got out.”

The Regent, however, had brought with him several light metal poles, which I had not observed while carried by his companion, but which being put together formed a convenient ladder of adequate length. He desired me to ascend first and cut the riband by means of which the window had been sealed; the law being so strict that even he would not violate the symbol of private ownership which protected my vessel. Having done this and opened the window, I sprang down, and he, followed by his companion, ascended the ladder, and resting himself upon the broad inner ledge of the window—which afforded a convenient seat, since the crystal was but half the thickness of the wall—first took a long look all round the interior, and then leaped down, followed by his attendant. Eveena drew back, but was at last persuaded to mount the ladder with my assistance, and rest on the sill till I followed her and lifted her down inside. The Regent had by this time reached the machinery, and was examining it very curiously, with greater apparent appreciation of its purpose than I should have expected. When we joined them, I found little difficulty in explaining the purpose and working of most parts of the apparatus. The nature and generation of the apercic power I took care not to explain. The existence of such a repulsive force was the point on which the Regent professed incredulity; as it was, of course, the critical fact on which my whole narrative turned—on which its truth or falsehood depended. I resolved ere the close of the inspection to give him clear practical evidence on this score. In the meantime, listening without answer to his expressions of doubt, I followed him round the interior, explaining to him and to Eveena the use and structure of the thermometer, barycrite, and other instruments. My fair companion seemed to follow my explanation almost as easily as the officials. Our followers, who had now entered the vessel, kept within hearing of my remarks; but, evidently aware that they were there on sufferance, asked no questions, and made their comments in a tone too low to allow me to understand their purport. The impression made on the Regent by the instruments, so far as I could gather from his brief remarks and the expression of his face, was one of contemptuous surprise rather than the interest excited by the motive machinery. Most of them were evidently, in his opinion, clumsy contrivances for obtaining results which the scientific knowledge and inventive genius of his countrymen had long ago secured more completely and more easily. But he was puzzled by the combination of such imperfect knowledge or semi-barbaric ignorance with the possession of a secret of such immense importance as the repulsive current, not yet known nor, as I gathered, even conceived by the inhabitants of this planet. When he had completed his inspection, he requested permission to remove some of the objects I had left there; notably many of the dead plants, and several books of drawings, mathematical, mechanical, and ornamental, which I had left, and which had not been brought away by my host’s son when he visited the vessel. These I begged him to present to the Camptâ, adding to them a few smaller curiosities, after which I drew him back towards the machinery. He summoned his attendant, and bade him take away to the carriages the articles I had given him, calling upon the intruders to assist.

I was thus left with him and with Eveena alone in the building; and with a partly serious, partly mischievous desire to prove to him the substantial reality of objects so closely related to my own disputed existence, and to demonstrate the truth of my story, I loosened one of the conductors, connected it with the machinery, and, directing it against him, sent through it a very slight apercic current. I was not quite prepared for the result. His Highness was instantly knocked head over heels to a considerable distance. Turning to interrupt the current before going to his

assistance, I was startled to perceive that an accident of graver moment, in my estimation at least, than the discomfiture of this exalted official, had resulted from my experiment. I had not noticed that a conductive wire was accidentally in contact with the apercion, while its end hung down towards the floor. Of this I suppose Eveena had carelessly taken hold, and a part of the current passing through it had lessened the shock to the Regent at the expense of one which, though it could not possibly have injured her, had from its suddenness so shaken her nerves as to throw her into a momentary swoon. She was recovering almost as soon as I reached her; and by the time her fellow-sufferer had picked himself up in great disgust and astonishment, was partly aware what had happened. She was, however; much more anxious to excuse herself, in the manner of a frightened child, for meddling with the machinery than to hear my apologies for the accident. Noting her agitation, and seeing that she was still trembling all over, I was more anxious to get her into the open air, and out of reach of the apparatus she seemed to regard with considerable alarm, than to offer any due apology to the exalted personage to whom I had afforded much stronger evidence, if not of my own substantiality, yet of the real existence of a repulsive energy, than I had seriously intended. With a few hurried words to him, I raised Eveena to the window, and lifted her to the ground outside. I felt, however, that I could not leave the Regent to find his own way out, the more so that I hardly saw how he could reach the window from the inside without my assistance. I excused myself, therefore, and seating her on a rock close to the ladder, promised to return at once. This, however, I found impossible. By the time the injured officer had recovered the physical shock to his nerves and the moral effect of the disrespect to his person, his anxiety to verify what he had heard entirely occupied his mind; and he requested further experiments, not upon himself, which occupied some half-hour. He listened and spoke, I must admit, with temper; but his air of displeasure was evident enough, and I was aware that I had not entitled myself to his good word, whether or not he would permit his resentment to colour his account of facts. He was compelled, however, to request my help in reaching the window, which I gave with all possible deference.

But, to my alarm, when we reached the foot of the ladder, Eveena was nowhere to be seen. Calling her and receiving no reply, calling again and hearing what sounded like her voice, but in a faint tone and coming I knew not whither, I ran round the platform to seek her. I could see nothing of her; but at one point, just where the projecting edge of the platform overhung the precipice below, I recognised her bird fluttering its wings and screaming as if in pain or terror. The Regent was calling me in a somewhat imperious tone, but of course received neither answer nor attention. Reaching the spot, I looked over the edge and with some trouble discovered what had happened. Not merely below but underneath the overhanging edge was a shelf about four feet long and some ten inches in breadth, covered with a flower equally remarkable in form and colour, the former being that of a hollow cylindrical bell, about two inches in diameter; the latter a bluish lilac, the nearest approach to azure I have seen in Mars—the whole ground one sheet of flowers. On this, holding in a half-insensible state to the outward-sloping rock above her, Eveena clung, her veil and head-dress fallen, her face expressing utter bewilderment as well as terror. I saw, though at the moment I hardly understood, how she had reached this point. A very narrow path, some hundred feet in length, sloped down from the table-rock of the summit to the shelf on which she stood, with an outer hedge of shrubs and the summits of small trees, which concealed, and in some sort guarded, the precipice below, so that even a timid girl might pursue the path without fear. But this path ended several feet from the commencement of the shelf. Across the gap had lain a fallen tree, with boughs affording such a screen and railing on the outward side as

might at once conceal the gulf below, and afford assistance in crossing the chasm. But in crossing this tree Eveena's footsteps had displaced it, and it had so given way as not only to be unavailable, but a serious obstacle to my passage. Had I had time to go round, I might have been able to leap the chasm; I certainly could not return that way with a burden even so light as that of my precious charge. The only chance was to lift her by main force directly to where I stood; and the outward projection of the rock at this point rendered this peculiarly difficult, as I had nothing to cling or hold by. The Regent had by this time reached me, and discerned what had occurred.

"Hold me fast," I said, "or sit upon me if you like, to hold me with your weight whilst I lean over." The man stood astounded, not by the danger of another but by the demand on himself; and evidently without the slightest intention of complying.

"You are mad!" he said. "Your chance is ten times greater to lose your own life than to save hers."

"Lose my life!" I cried. "Could I dare return alive without her? Throw your whole weight on me, I say, as I lean over, and waste no more time!"

"What!" he rejoined. "You are twice as heavy as I, and if you are pulled over I shall probably go over too. Why am I to endanger myself to save a girl from the consequences of her folly?"

"If you do not," I swore, "I will fling you where the carcass of which you are so careful shall be crushed out of the very form of the manhood you disgrace."

Even this threat failed to move him. Meantime the bird, fluttering on my shoulder, suggested a last chance; and snatching the tablet round its neck, I wrote two words thereon, and calling to it, "Home!" the intelligent creature flew off at fullest speed.

"Now," I said, "if you do not help me I will kill you here and now. If you pretend to help and fail me, that bird carries to Esmo my request to hold you answerable for our lives."

I invoked, in utter desperation, the awe with which, as his hints and my experience implied, Esmo was regarded by his neighbours; and slender as seemed this support, it did not fail me. The Regent's countenance fell, and I saw that I might depend at least on his passive compliance. Claspings his arm with my left hand, I said, "Pull back with all your might. If I go over, you shall go over too." Then pulling him down with me, and stretching myself over the precipice so far that but for this additional support I must have fallen, I reached Eveena, whose closed eyes and relaxing limbs indicated that another moment's delay might be fatal.

"Give me your hand," I cried in despair, seeing how tightly she still grasped the tough fibrous shoots growing in the crevices of the rock, whereof she had taken hold. "Give me your hand, and let go!"

To give me her hand was beyond the power of her will; to let go without giving me hold would have been fatal. Beaching over to the uttermost, I contrived to lay a firm grasp upon her wrist. But this would not do. I could hardly drag her up by one arm, especially if she would not relax

her grasp. I must release the Regent and depend upon his obedience, or forfeit the chance of saving her, as in a few more moments she would certainly swoon and fall.

“Throw yourself upon me, and sit firm, if you value your life,” I cried, and I relaxed my hold on his arm, stretching both hands to grasp Eveena. I felt the man’s weight on my body, and with both arms extended to the uttermost hanging over the edge, I caught firm hold of the girl’s shoulders. Even now, with any girl of her age on earth, and for aught I know with many Martial damsels, the case would have been hopeless. My whole strength was required to raise her; I had none to spare to force her loose from her hold. Fortunately my rough and tight clasp seemed to rouse her. Her eyes half opened, and semi-consciousness appeared to have returned.

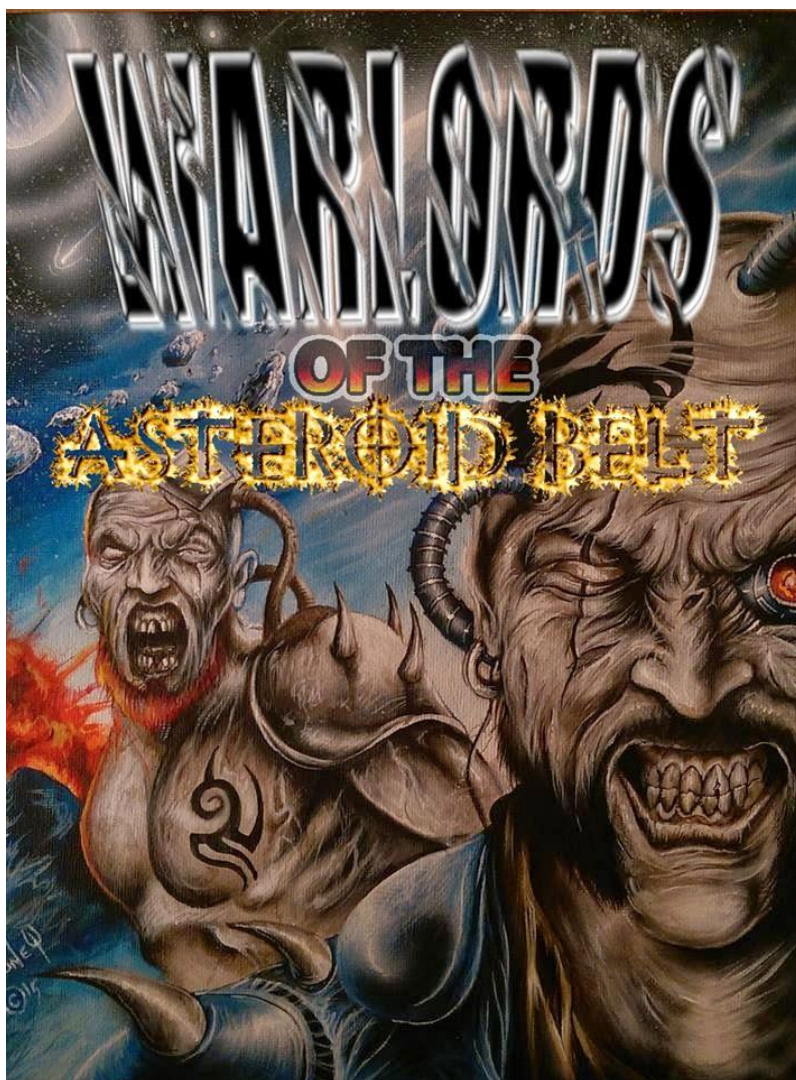
“Let go!” I cried in that sharp tone of imperious anger which—with some tempers at least—is the natural expression of the outward impulse produced by supreme and agonizing terror. Obedience is the hereditary lesson taught to her sex by the effects of equality in Mars. Eveena had been personally trained in a principle long discarded by Terrestrial women; and not half aware what she did, but yielding instinctively to the habit of compliance with imperative command spoken in a masculine voice, she opened her hands just as I had lost all hope. With one desperate effort I swung her fairly on to the platform, and, seeing her safe there, fell back myself scarcely more sensible than she was.

The whole of this terrible scene, which it has taken so long to relate, did not occupy more than a minute in action. I know not whether my readers can understand the full difficulty and danger of the situation. I know that no words of mine can convey the impression graven into my own memory, never to be effaced or weakened while consciousness remains. The strongest man on Earth could not have done what I did; could not, lying half over the precipice, have swung a girl of eighteen right out from underneath him, and to his own level. But Eveena was of slighter, smaller frame than a healthy French girl of twelve, while I retained the full strength of a man adapted to the work of a world where every weight is twice as heavy as on Mars. What I had practically to do was to lift not seven or eight stone of European girlhood, not even the six Eveena might possibly have weighed on Earth, but half that weight. And yet the position was such that all the strength I had acquired through ten years of constant practice in the field and in the chase, all the power of a frame in healthful maturity, and of muscles whose force seemed doubled by the tension of the nerves, hardly availed. When I recovered my own senses, and had contrived to restore Eveena’s, my unwilling assistant had disappeared.

It was an hour before Eveena seemed in a condition to be removed, and perhaps I was not very urgent to hurry her away. I had done no more than any man, the lowest and meanest on Earth, must have done under the circumstances. I can scarcely enter into the feelings of the fellow-man who, in my position, could have recognised a choice but between saving and perishing with the helpless creature entrusted to his charge. But hereditary disbelief in any power above the physical forces of Nature, in any law higher than that of man’s own making, has rendered human nature in Mars something utterly different from, perhaps, hardly intelligible to, the human nature of a planet forty million miles nearer the Sun. Though brought up in an affectionate home, Eveena shared the ideas of the world in which she was born; and so far accepted its standards of opinion and action as natural if not right, that the risk I had run, the effort I had made to save her, seemed to her scarcely less extraordinary than it had appeared to the Zamptâ. She rated its

devotion and generosity as highly as he appreciated its extravagance and folly; and if he counted me a madman, she was disposed to elevate me into a hero or a demi-god. The tones and looks of a maiden in such a temper, however perfect her maidenly reserve, would, I fancy, be very agreeable to men older than I was, either in constitution or even in experience. I doubt whether any man under fifty would have been more anxious than myself to cut short our period of repose, broken as it was, when I refused to listen to her tearful penitence and self-reproach, by occasional words and looks of gratitude and admiration. I did, however, remember that it was expedient to refasten the window, and re-attach the seals, before departing. At the end of the hour's rest I allowed my charge and myself, I had recovered more or less completely the nervous force which had been for a while utterly exhausted, less by the effort than by the terror that preceded it. I was neither surprised, nor perhaps as much grieved as I should have been, to find that Eveena could hardly walk; and felt to the full the value of those novel conditions which enabled me to carry her the more easily in my arms, though much oppressed even by so slight an effort in that thin air, to the place where we had left our carriage—no inconsiderable distance by the path we had to pursue. Before starting on our return I had, in despite of her most earnest entreaties, managed to recover her head-dress and veil, at a risk which, under other circumstances, I might not have cared to encounter. But had she been seen without it on our return, the comments of the whole neighbourhood would have been such as might have disturbed even her father's cool indifference. We reached her home in safety, and with little notice, having, of course, drawn the canopy around us as completely as possible. I was pleased to find that only her younger sister, to whose care I at once committed her, was there at present, the elders not having yet returned. I took care to detach from the bird's neck the tablet which had served its purpose so well. The creature had found his way home within half-an-hour after I dismissed him, and had frightened Zevle [Stella] not a little; though the message, which a fatal result would have made sufficiently intelligible to Esmo, utterly escaped her comprehension.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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THE WAR OF THE WORLDS by HG Wells

Book One: The Coming of The Martians

Chapter Twelve: What I Saw Of The Destruction Of Weybridge And Shepperton

As the dawn grew brighter we withdrew from the window from which we had watched the Martians, and went very quietly downstairs.

The artilleryman agreed with me that the house was no place to stay in. He proposed, he said, to make his way Londonward, and thence rejoin his battery—No. 12, of the Horse Artillery. My plan was to return at once to Leatherhead; and so greatly had the strength of the Martians impressed me that I had determined to take my wife to Newhaven, and go with her out of the country forthwith. For I already perceived clearly that the country about London must inevitably be the scene of a disastrous struggle before such creatures as these could be destroyed.

Between us and Leatherhead, however, lay the third cylinder, with its guarding giants. Had I been alone, I think I should have taken my chance and struck across country. But the artilleryman dissuaded me: “It’s no kindness to the right sort of wife,” he said, “to make her a widow”; and in the end I agreed to go with him, under cover of the woods, northward as far as Street Cobham before I parted with him. Thence I would make a big detour by Epsom to reach Leatherhead.

I should have started at once, but my companion had been in active service and he knew better than that. He made me ransack the house for a flask, which he filled with whiskey; and we lined every available pocket with packets of biscuits and slices of meat. Then we crept out of the house, and ran as quickly as we could down the ill-made road by which I had come overnight. The houses seemed deserted. In the road lay a group of three charred bodies close together, struck dead by the Heat-Ray; and here and there were things that people had dropped—a clock, a slipper, a silver spoon, and the like poor valuables. At the corner turning up towards the post office a little cart, filled with boxes and furniture, and horseless, heeled over on a broken wheel. A cash box had been hastily smashed open and thrown under the debris.

Except the lodge at the Orphanage, which was still on fire, none of the houses had suffered very greatly here. The Heat-Ray had shaved the chimney tops and passed. Yet, save ourselves, there did not seem to be a living soul on Maybury Hill. The majority of the inhabitants had escaped, I suppose, by way of the Old Woking road—the road I had taken when I drove to Leatherhead—or they had hidden.

We went down the lane, by the body of the man in black, sodden now from the overnight hail, and broke into the woods at the foot of the hill. We pushed through these towards the railway without meeting a soul. The woods across the line were but the scarred and blackened ruins of woods; for the most part the trees had fallen, but a certain proportion still stood, dismal grey stems, with dark brown foliage instead of green.

On our side the fire had done no more than scorch the nearer trees; it had failed to secure its

footing. In one place the woodmen had been at work on Saturday; trees, felled and freshly trimmed, lay in a clearing, with heaps of sawdust by the sawing-machine and its engine. Hard by was a temporary hut, deserted. There was not a breath of wind this morning, and everything was strangely still. Even the birds were hushed, and as we hurried along I and the artilleryman talked in whispers and looked now and again over our shoulders. Once or twice we stopped to listen.

After a time we drew near the road, and as we did so we heard the clatter of hoofs and saw through the tree stems three cavalry soldiers riding slowly towards Woking. We hailed them, and they halted while we hurried towards them. It was a lieutenant and a couple of privates of the 8th Hussars, with a stand like a theodolite, which the artilleryman told me was a heliograph.

“You are the first men I’ve seen coming this way this morning,” said the lieutenant. “What’s brewing?”

His voice and face were eager. The men behind him stared curiously. The artilleryman jumped down the bank into the road and saluted.

“Gun destroyed last night, sir. Have been hiding. Trying to rejoin battery, sir. You’ll come in sight of the Martians, I expect, about half a mile along this road.”

“What the dickens are they like?” asked the lieutenant.

“Giants in armour, sir. Hundred feet high. Three legs and a body like ‘luminium, with a mighty great head in a hood, sir.”

“Get out!” said the lieutenant. “What confounded nonsense!”

“You’ll see, sir. They carry a kind of box, sir, that shoots fire and strikes you dead.”

“What d’ye mean—a gun?”

“No, sir,” and the artilleryman began a vivid account of the Heat-Ray. Halfway through, the lieutenant interrupted him and looked up at me. I was still standing on the bank by the side of the road.

“It’s perfectly true,” I said.

“Well,” said the lieutenant, “I suppose it’s my business to see it too. Look here”—to the artilleryman—“we’re detailed here clearing people out of their houses. You’d better go along and report yourself to Brigadier-General Marvin, and tell him all you know. He’s at Weybridge. Know the way?”

“I do,” I said; and he turned his horse southward again.

“Half a mile, you say?” said he.

“At most,” I answered, and pointed over the treetops southward. He thanked me and rode on, and we saw them no more.

Farther along we came upon a group of three women and two children in the road, busy clearing out a labourer’s cottage. They had got hold of a little hand truck, and were piling it up with unclean-looking bundles and shabby furniture. They were all too assiduously engaged to talk to us as we passed.

By Byfleet station we emerged from the pine trees, and found the country calm and peaceful under the morning sunlight. We were far beyond the range of the Heat-Ray there, and had it not been for the silent desertion of some of the houses, the stirring movement of packing in others, and the knot of soldiers standing on the bridge over the railway and staring down the line towards Woking, the day would have seemed very like any other Sunday.

Several farm waggons and carts were moving creakily along the road to Addlestone, and suddenly through the gate of a field we saw, across a stretch of flat meadow, six twelve-pounders standing neatly at equal distances pointing towards Woking. The gunners stood by the guns waiting, and the ammunition waggons were at a business-like distance. The men stood almost as if under inspection.

“That’s good!” said I. “They will get one fair shot, at any rate.”

The artilleryman hesitated at the gate.

“I shall go on,” he said.

Farther on towards Weybridge, just over the bridge, there were a number of men in white fatigue jackets throwing up a long rampart, and more guns behind.

“It’s bows and arrows against the lightning, anyhow,” said the artilleryman. “They ‘aven’t seen that fire-beam yet.”

The officers who were not actively engaged stood and stared over the treetops south-westward, and the men digging would stop every now and again to stare in the same direction.

Byfleet was in a tumult; people packing, and a score of hussars, some of them dismounted, some on horseback, were hunting them about. Three or four black government waggons, with crosses in white circles, and an old omnibus, among other vehicles, were being loaded in the village street. There were scores of people, most of them sufficiently sabbatical to have assumed their best clothes. The soldiers were having the greatest difficulty in making them realise the gravity of their position. We saw one shrivelled old fellow with a huge box and a score or more of flower pots containing orchids, angrily expostulating with the corporal who would leave them behind. I stopped and gripped his arm.

“Do you know what’s over there?” I said, pointing at the pine tops that hid the Martians.

“Eh?” said he, turning. “I was explainin’ these is vallyble.”

“Death!” I shouted. “Death is coming! Death!” and leaving him to digest that if he could, I hurried on after the artillery-man. At the corner I looked back. The soldier had left him, and he was still standing by his box, with the pots of orchids on the lid of it, and staring vaguely over the trees.

No one in Weybridge could tell us where the headquarters were established; the whole place was in such confusion as I had never seen in any town before. Carts, carriages everywhere, the most astonishing miscellany of conveyances and horseflesh. The respectable inhabitants of the place, men in golf and boating costumes, wives prettily dressed, were packing, river-side loafers energetically helping, children excited, and, for the most part, highly delighted at this astonishing variation of their Sunday experiences. In the midst of it all the worthy vicar was very pluckily holding an early celebration, and his bell was jangling out above the excitement.

I and the artilleryman, seated on the step of the drinking fountain, made a very passable meal upon what we had brought with us. Patrols of soldiers—here no longer hussars, but grenadiers in white—were warning people to move now or to take refuge in their cellars as soon as the firing began. We saw as we crossed the railway bridge that a growing crowd of people had assembled in and about the railway station, and the swarming platform was piled with boxes and packages. The ordinary traffic had been stopped, I believe, in order to allow of the passage of troops and guns to Chertsey, and I have heard since that a savage struggle occurred for places in the special trains that were put on at a later hour.

We remained at Weybridge until midday, and at that hour we found ourselves at the place near Shepperton Lock where the Wey and Thames join. Part of the time we spent helping two old women to pack a little cart. The Wey has a treble mouth, and at this point boats are to be hired, and there was a ferry across the river. On the Shepperton side was an inn with a lawn, and beyond that the tower of Shepperton Church—it has been replaced by a spire—rose above the trees.

Here we found an excited and noisy crowd of fugitives. As yet the flight had not grown to a panic, but there were already far more people than all the boats going to and fro could enable to cross. People came panting along under heavy burdens; one husband and wife were even carrying a small outhouse door between them, with some of their household goods piled thereon. One man told us he meant to try to get away from Shepperton station.

There was a lot of shouting, and one man was even jesting. The idea people seemed to have here was that the Martians were simply formidable human beings, who might attack and sack the town, to be certainly destroyed in the end. Every now and then people would glance nervously across the Wey, at the meadows towards Chertsey, but everything over there was still.

Across the Thames, except just where the boats landed, everything was quiet, in vivid contrast with the Surrey side. The people who landed there from the boats went tramping off down the lane. The big ferryboat had just made a journey. Three or four soldiers stood on the lawn of the inn, staring and jesting at the fugitives, without offering to help. The inn was closed, as it was

now within prohibited hours.

“What’s that?” cried a boatman, and “Shut up, you fool!” said a man near me to a yelping dog. Then the sound came again, this time from the direction of Chertsey, a muffled thud—the sound of a gun.

The fighting was beginning. Almost immediately unseen batteries across the river to our right, unseen because of the trees, took up the chorus, firing heavily one after the other. A woman screamed. Everyone stood arrested by the sudden stir of battle, near us and yet invisible to us. Nothing was to be seen save flat meadows, cows feeding unconcernedly for the most part, and silvery pollard willows motionless in the warm sunlight.

“The sojers’ll stop ‘em,” said a woman beside me, doubtfully. A haziness rose over the treetops.

Then suddenly we saw a rush of smoke far away up the river, a puff of smoke that jerked up into the air and hung; and forthwith the ground heaved under foot and a heavy explosion shook the air, smashing two or three windows in the houses near, and leaving us astonished.

“Here they are!” shouted a man in a blue jersey. “Yonder! D’yer see them? Yonder!”

Quickly, one after the other, one, two, three, four of the armoured Martians appeared, far away over the little trees, across the flat meadows that stretched towards Chertsey, and striding hurriedly towards the river. Little cowed figures they seemed at first, going with a rolling motion and as fast as flying birds.

Then, advancing obliquely towards us, came a fifth. Their armoured bodies glittered in the sun as they swept swiftly forward upon the guns, growing rapidly larger as they drew nearer. One on the extreme left, the remotest that is, flourished a huge case high in the air, and the ghostly, terrible Heat-Ray I had already seen on Friday night smote towards Chertsey, and struck the town.

At sight of these strange, swift, and terrible creatures the crowd near the water’s edge seemed to me to be for a moment horror-struck. There was no screaming or shouting, but a silence. Then a hoarse murmur and a movement of feet—a splashing from the water. A man, too frightened to drop the portmanteau he carried on his shoulder, swung round and sent me staggering with a blow from the corner of his burden. A woman thrust at me with her hand and rushed past me. I turned with the rush of the people, but I was not too terrified for thought. The terrible Heat-Ray was in my mind. To get under water! That was it!

“Get under water!” I shouted, unheeded.

I faced about again, and rushed towards the approaching Martian, rushed right down the gravelly beach and headlong into the water. Others did the same. A boatload of people putting back came leaping out as I rushed past. The stones under my feet were muddy and slippery, and the river was so low that I ran perhaps twenty feet scarcely waist-deep. Then, as the Martian towered overhead scarcely a couple of hundred yards away, I flung myself forward under the surface. The

splashes of the people in the boats leaping into the river sounded like thunderclaps in my ears. People were landing hastily on both sides of the river. But the Martian machine took no more notice for the moment of the people running this way and that than a man would of the confusion of ants in a nest against which his foot has kicked. When, half suffocated, I raised my head above water, the Martian's hood pointed at the batteries that were still firing across the river, and as it advanced it swung loose what must have been the generator of the Heat-Ray.

In another moment it was on the bank, and in a stride wading halfway across. The knees of its foremost legs bent at the farther bank, and in another moment it had raised itself to its full height again, close to the village of Shepperton. Forthwith the six guns which, unknown to anyone on the right bank, had been hidden behind the outskirts of that village, fired simultaneously. The sudden near concussion, the last close upon the first, made my heart jump. The monster was already raising the case generating the Heat-Ray as the first shell burst six yards above the hood.

I gave a cry of astonishment. I saw and thought nothing of the other four Martian monsters; my attention was riveted upon the nearer incident. Simultaneously two other shells burst in the air near the body as the hood twisted round in time to receive, but not in time to dodge, the fourth shell.

The shell burst clean in the face of the Thing. The hood bulged, flashed, was whirled off in a dozen tattered fragments of red flesh and glittering metal.

"Hit!" shouted I, with something between a scream and a cheer.

I heard answering shouts from the people in the water about me. I could have leaped out of the water with that momentary exultation.

The decapitated colossus reeled like a drunken giant; but it did not fall over. It recovered its balance by a miracle, and, no longer heeding its steps and with the camera that fired the Heat-Ray now rigidly upheld, it reeled swiftly upon Shepperton. The living intelligence, the Martian within the hood, was slain and splashed to the four winds of heaven, and the Thing was now but a mere intricate device of metal whirling to destruction. It drove along in a straight line, incapable of guidance. It struck the tower of Shepperton Church, smashing it down as the impact of a battering ram might have done, swerved aside, blundered on and collapsed with tremendous force into the river out of my sight.

A violent explosion shook the air, and a spout of water, steam, mud, and shattered metal shot far up into the sky. As the camera of the Heat-Ray hit the water, the latter had immediately flashed into steam. In another moment a huge wave, like a muddy tidal bore but almost scaldingly hot, came sweeping round the bend upstream. I saw people struggling shorewards, and heard their screaming and shouting faintly above the seething and roar of the Martian's collapse.

For a moment I heeded nothing of the heat, forgot the patent need of self-preservation. I splashed through the tumultuous water, pushing aside a man in black to do so, until I could see round the bend. Half a dozen deserted boats pitched aimlessly upon the confusion of the waves. The fallen Martian came into sight downstream, lying across the river, and for the most part submerged.

Thick clouds of steam were pouring off the wreckage, and through the tumultuously whirling wisps I could see, intermittently and vaguely, the gigantic limbs churning the water and flinging a splash and spray of mud and froth into the air. The tentacles swayed and struck like living arms, and, save for the helpless purposelessness of these movements, it was as if some wounded thing were struggling for its life amid the waves. Enormous quantities of a ruddy-brown fluid were spurting up in noisy jets out of the machine.

My attention was diverted from this death flurry by a furious yelling, like that of the thing called a siren in our manufacturing towns. A man, knee-deep near the towing path, shouted inaudibly to me and pointed. Looking back, I saw the other Martians advancing with gigantic strides down the riverbank from the direction of Chertsey. The Shepperton guns spoke this time unavailingly.

At that I ducked at once under water, and, holding my breath until movement was an agony, blundered painfully ahead under the surface as long as I could. The water was in a tumult about me, and rapidly growing hotter.

When for a moment I raised my head to take breath and throw the hair and water from my eyes, the steam was rising in a whirling white fog that at first hid the Martians altogether. The noise was deafening. Then I saw them dimly, colossal figures of grey, magnified by the mist. They had passed by me, and two were stooping over the frothing, tumultuous ruins of their comrade.

The third and fourth stood beside him in the water, one perhaps two hundred yards from me, the other towards Laleham. The generators of the Heat-Rays waved high, and the hissing beams smote down this way and that.

The air was full of sound, a deafening and confusing conflict of noises—the clangorous din of the Martians, the crash of falling houses, the thud of trees, fences, sheds flashing into flame, and the crackling and roaring of fire. Dense black smoke was leaping up to mingle with the steam from the river, and as the Heat-Ray went to and fro over Weybridge its impact was marked by flashes of incandescent white, that gave place at once to a smoky dance of lurid flames. The nearer houses still stood intact, awaiting their fate, shadowy, faint and pallid in the steam, with the fire behind them going to and fro.

For a moment perhaps I stood there, breast-high in the almost boiling water, dumbfounded at my position, hopeless of escape. Through the reek I could see the people who had been with me in the river scrambling out of the water through the reeds, like little frogs hurrying through grass from the advance of a man, or running to and fro in utter dismay on the towing path.

Then suddenly the white flashes of the Heat-Ray came leaping towards me. The houses caved in as they dissolved at its touch, and darted out flames; the trees changed to fire with a roar. The Ray flickered up and down the towing path, licking off the people who ran this way and that, and came down to the water's edge not fifty yards from where I stood. It swept across the river to Shepperton, and the water in its track rose in a boiling weal crested with steam. I turned shoreward.

In another moment the huge wave, well-nigh at the boiling-point had rushed upon me. I screamed aloud, and scalded, half blinded, agonised, I staggered through the leaping, hissing water towards the shore. Had my foot stumbled, it would have been the end. I fell helplessly, in full sight of the Martians, upon the broad, bare gravelly spit that runs down to mark the angle of the Wey and Thames. I expected nothing but death.

I have a dim memory of the foot of a Martian coming down within a score of yards of my head, driving straight into the loose gravel, whirling it this way and that and lifting again; of a long suspense, and then of the four carrying the debris of their comrade between them, now clear and then presently faint through a veil of smoke, receding interminably, as it seemed to me, across a vast space of river and meadow. And then, very slowly, I realised that by a miracle I had escaped.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)