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Schlock!

WEBZINE

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THE MAN IN THE BROWN GANZY

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—A PRACTITIONER
OF THE BLACK
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HELL'S BAILIFFS

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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ROGUE PLANET PRESS SUBMISSIONS CALL

EDITORIAL

This week, Clive Doolittle hopes a beloved item of clothing will help him amid the horrors of the backwaters. Leyden finds fear in the mountains of Papua. A man grows dangerously obsessed with an inhabitant of No. 212. And four young adventurers set out to deliver a lonely taverner from a diabolical threat.

The Battle for Callisto breaks into countless dogfights around the Jovian satellite, while Jeffrey and Emily are in trouble. A party assembles at Montbrun's château, unaware of the storm to come. The settlers on Lincoln Island ponder the mysterious explosion. And Olaf is put on trial.

—Gavin Chappell

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THE MAN IN THE BROWN GANZY by Gary Murphy

Clive Doolittle was from a place in England called West Cumbria. How he ended up in New Orleans, in the job he was in, was a long story, yet it was a great job and fulfilling, paid well, and give him great satisfaction. He was a support worker, aged 56, and struggling with a heart condition and diabetes, as well—at the moment—as heat sickness. Cool Bridge in this state was a hot corner of the world, with high heat and little breeze.

His bosses were New York-based, and he chose to live in the Big Apple for a while, fulfilling a life-long dream, and yet soon realized he could never settle there, simply because of the noise, the crowding, the cost of living including rent, electricity and heating in his small apartment, and the fact he'd met someone he thought he loved and could see himself spending the rest of his life with, only to come home one evening to find her in bed with one of her work colleagues. Mary was a beauty, too. Flame-haired, a Yoga instructor, and twenty years his junior—what could possibly go wrong? He guessed she'd grown tired of his routine and shuffling about. This was New York, for goodness sakes!

But now, it was New Orleans and the humidity and the absence of any white faces was sometimes overwhelming. He just hoped he upset nobody. Never the bigoted type, he did not wish to be construed as racist. He was tolerant in every fashion and so far, everything had gone to plan and slipped into its rightful place without so much as a minor hitch anywhere along the line so far, which as some people might have thought and would have been perfectly correct, was some minor miracle given the politics and attitudes towards race and racial tensions in this corner of the world, with its chequered history of prejudice and violent behaviour.

Clive Doolittle was stationed in Cool Bridge to look after a vulnerable ten-year-old boy who was called Arthur Jonson whilst his mother recovered in the local hospice, where she was being treated for a rare blood disorder. Rumour had it that Clive may have been here for some time yet, since her recovery seemed to drag on and on.

But something was amiss. This story wasn't entirely true.

Martha Jonson was a practitioner of the Black Arts. She never really had a rare blood disease. Martha was not in a bad way, at all.

Clive sat with Arthur in the front room that night and together with the boy sweated the night out, as the boy put his hands together at one point and prayed for rainfall to bring some feeling of coolness and serenity in the backwater village' of Cool Bridge. Arthur finally broke his silence—he was a quiet boy, rarely conversing due to terminal shyness, who rarely even kept direct eye-contact.

He said, "Clive, my mother is the Devil's spawn, she loves and worships Lucifer and would die for him, or sacrifice me, her only son, did the Devil wish it...she is possessed by evil spirits that rule her movement, her thoughts, her loves and desires...like the Devil, my mother is evil. Tonight, the men in the village are trying to extract the demons from her. I'm hoping she'll return to just being my momma. But I fear for her...I fear for myself...I fear for you, Clive, because she will return here tonight."

Clive wasn't taking any of this devilish nonsense. Immediately, to go about changing the somewhat morbid conversational subject, he would instead grin and show the boy something. "Do you like my old brown ganzy? My old Grandma Judith knitted it for me many years ago and I've worn it most of my adult life. Whilst working with clients or with you as your support worker, I wear it to sleep in, because it's a very warm ganzy." He looked at his watch, and added, "It is almost past ten o'clock at night, Arthur...maybe you should go to bed. I'll just doss on the settee."

"Are you my friend, Arthur?" the boy inquired, eyes wide and mostly without expression.

It was a difficult thing to respond to.

But Clive replied very tactfully, "I'm just doing my job. I'm your support worker. I'm afraid I can't class myself as your friend mainly because I get a wage to be here, and was I your friend, I'd be your friend without accepting money. I'm just doing my job."

The boy looked down in the mouth. "Can I go for a walk before bed?"

"Of course—I'll even come with you."

"No," the boy insisted, "I must go alone. It is the village custom..." he said, which was a lie.

Clive folded his arms. The boy was only ten and he wanted to go outdoors in the dark. Yet he relented, "Sure thing, Arthur...I'll wait right here."

Suddenly, Arthur stood and ran for the door.

Clive inwardly debated if he'd done the right thing in letting the boy go outside at such an ungodly time—in an area where so many bad and ugly things were prone to happen. Standing at the door still debating, he wondered if he'd upset the boy. He stood there and looked into the night, surveying the vicinity yet not seeing Arthur. The strange thing was that Clive bent an ear as he thought he could have heard something like grown men chanting, or loud prayer, or people raising their tone of voice and shouting. Clive's eyes focused on a possible source; the only place it could have issued from was the small wooden, log building situated next to the river, somewhere down the bottom of the embankment where Arthur's home was found. Gingerly, the brave—or perhaps stupid—Englishman decided to go and investigate the territory. He gently left the door ajar and headed down the steep embankment towards the noisy wooden shed. He paused to address the brown ganzy whilst he chuckled and muttered, "Hope you're lucky, ganzy!"

Luckily, there was a window open through which he could see into the hut, which did not have glass, but a wire mesh—he glared through it, horrified at the vision before him.

At least five men stood around a mattress, shouting and wailing as they whipped a poor woman—quite a sizeable woman—with branches and wooden strips, angrily reciting obscene prayers and torturing the woman who was tied to the bed. Clive realized what was happening was an exorcism, and he would have just bet it was Martha that it was writhing around on this yellow-stained, dirty old bed, sweating profusely, swearing and cursing as her eyes glowed a terrible bright yellow as she glared at the men performing the wicked ceremony, as Martha fixed her gaze and curse on everyone in turn. It was the most disturbing act of perversity and

possession the confused Englishman had ever seen. Suddenly, he just hoped young Arthur was far, far away from here, when he realized that under no circumstances should he have seen his mother in such a demonic state. He turned and sprinted up the dusty embankment, yelling at the top of his lungs for Arthur, as well as other things including the good Lord to aid, and to get the attention of the police or a passing patrol car—anybody.

Rushing through the front door, which he'd left ajar, he stopped inside the living room of Arthur Jonson's house to fold and get his breath. After a search, he finally managed to find the landline telephone in a far corner of the room, and picked up the receiver to dial 911. But this was the backwaters, the township of Cool Bridge...and the damn phone was dead!

Lovingly, he gazed down at his beloved brown ganzy and fondled its thick woollen twill. "Throw me a lifeline, ganzy...don't let me down now!" His heart thumped and raced in his chest. Clive had to be careful. His condition was no joke. It could have killed him!

He'd suffered one heart attack not so long ago but knew that they were not as serious as strokes. He knew people lived long lives after heart attacks and healthy, exciting lives without any sniff of repercussions or other scary stuff. He would be just fine!

He spun around. An ungodly presence had crept up on him in the eerie silence. The vision before him in the small room baffled and petrified him in equal measure as he nearly passed out. Fortunately, his right hand reached out for the side of the brown leather settee to steady himself and keep from toppling over. He frowned heavily, as he gasped and held his chest with his right hand to feel his racing heart. He asked of the couple in the room, "Arthur...Martha...?"

The fat, naked woman's eyes glowed yellow. shegrinned to expose long, sharpened incisors, like a wild beast.

Arthur was the same as his mother, his eyes possessed and glowing yellow, his teeth in the same way. But the boy spoke, and there was no menace.

He said, "If you'd said I was your friend when I asked, my mother and I wouldn't have had to cook you in the pot and eat you."

The woman abruptly ran forwards, arms outstretched. Her hands grasped the English support worker's jugular, quickly squeezing and sucking his life away. Clive Doolittle lashed out yet had little effect on the mad, possessed lady's situation, since she had him in her grasp, and it was Martha Jonson alone that controlled his destiny—and where and when he died.

He managed a solid right hook to her jaw which momentarily disabled her, knocking Martha to the floor. Clive spotted his best and greatest opportunity for escape, as he accepted this opportunity and ran for the door, past a young demented Arthur who scurried forward to help his felled mother, the naked, flabby lady and witch who just lay there and cursed and shouted obscenities at her fleeing prey. Outside, Clive fumbled for his car keys and discovered them in his jacket pocket. In a jiffy he was in the car and driving away.

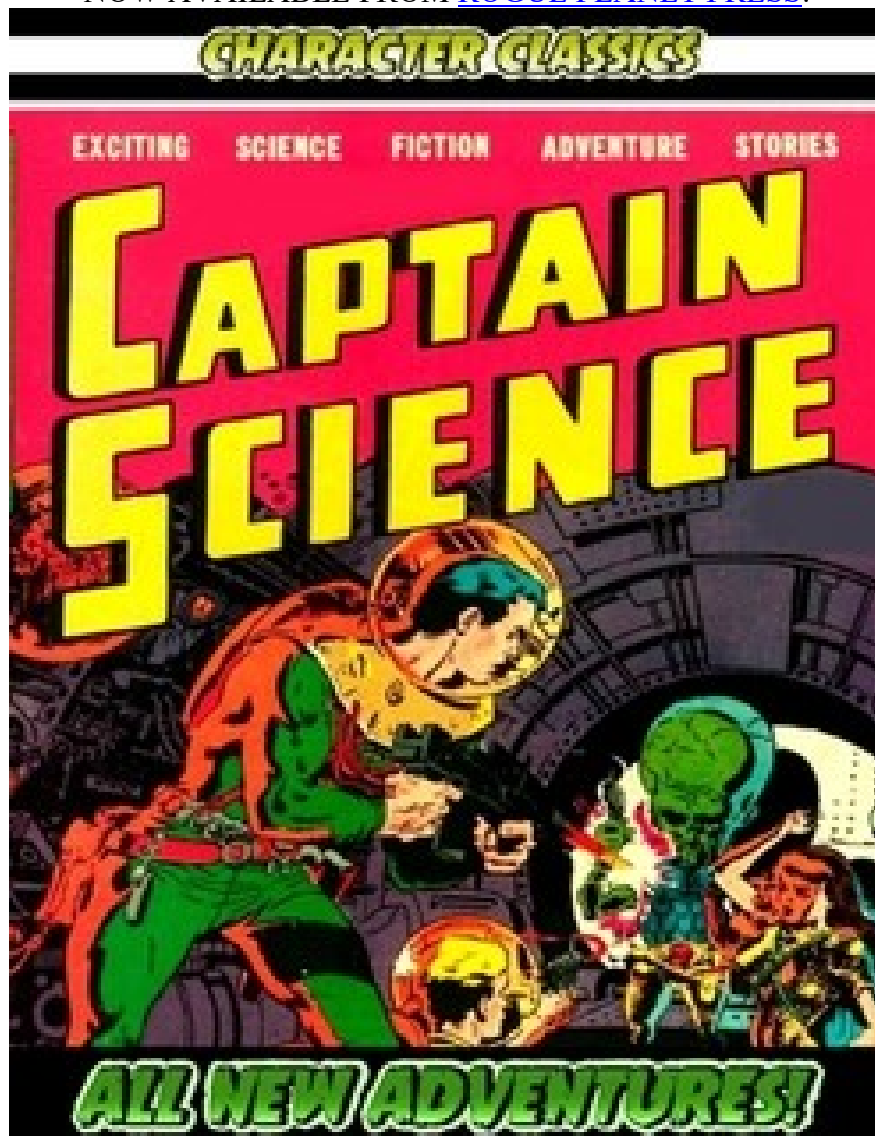
As his faithful white Skoda (purchased from a factory in Ohio) touched upon the highway and sped out of the state, the beleaguered man sobbed profoundly, yet also laughed with joy and rapture. He paused and fondled his brown, woollen ganzy—his biggest source of luck

and good fortune—and sobbed more, as he thanked the scruffy 30-year-old-plus article of clothing, his biggest companion which had gone with him the full journey from the North of England to the Deep South of the United States for blessing him tonight, and not letting him down in such a dire and distressing situation.

He left New Orleans thanking circumstances that truly seemed out of his control but twisted and turned in his favour. Now, it was back to England, and the countryside of Cumbria. Clive Doolittle would never look back.

THE END

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THE MOUNTAIN OF FEARS by Henry C Rowland

“Doctor,” said my shipmate, Dr. Leyden, “have you ever made any especial study of nervous diseases—central nervous diseases—morbid conditions resulting from a derangement of the central cells?”

I told him that I had done only such work in this branch as a general practice would require, but that I had observed some few cases of especial interest during a military surgical service in the East, and proceeded to cite one or two instances of mental vagaries resulting from gunshot wounds in the head.

Leyden leaned both elbows on the taffrail and listened restlessly. Our little ship swashed through the short sling of the Spanish Main, the Pole star gleaming ahead, the Southern Cross blazing astern, and all about the white, flashing crests of the phosphorescent sea. Usually Leyden was a good listener, but this night he seemed impatient, restive, to such an extent that I finally paused, annoyed, for nothing is so irritating as lack of attention to a solicited reply.

“Ach! but those cases are in the line of the ordinary!” he exclaimed.

“Pardon me,” I replied, “but the last case I have given was distinctly out of the ordinary.”

“I am awkward, Doctor,” said Leyden, apologetically. “I mean that the relations of cause and effect follow the usual course—the histological changes in the cell produced impaired function of the organ and these primary changes were the result of trauma. But have you ever had occasion to observe the reverse of this condition—the action of the organ on the centre—like a nightmare, where one has the liver poisoning the central cells—”

I interrupted in my turn. Leyden was no doubt a skilled naturalist, a close observer and a man of deep power of thought and analysis, but he was not a physician, had never made a regular study of physiological chemistry, and was, therefore, scarcely in a position to argue with a person who had.

“Such cases are not infrequent,” I answered. “The ancient Greeks understood that much, as we see from their terms. ‘Hypochondria’; under the ribs the liver probably poisoning the brain, if you like; then there is the condition of hysteria often accompanying a movable kidney; the action of certain drugs on special centres—”

“Such as *cannabis indica*?” interrupted Leyden, “which affects the sense of elapsed time and makes the subject happy—or—what is that principle, Doctor, which produces xanthopsia, or yellow vision, and makes one sluggish and depressed?”

“Xanthopsia is an early symptom of *santonin* poisoning,” I answered. “The alkaloid is obtained from the unexpanded flower-heads of the—”

“*Artemisia maritima*—yes—I know the plant but the active principle might occur elsewhere?”

“Possibly—”

“It is wonderful,” mused Leyden, in the self-communicative tone that was often difficult to follow— “the microscopic filament that makes or unmakes a man; the minute neurons which carry such a potent impulse—like the flash crossing a continent on a tiny wire to send two great nations to war. The wire is short-circuited, the nation disgraced; the neuron short-circuited, the individual disgraced. Such a thing once happened to me, Doctor.

“This was in Papua, an awesome country which holds in its dark recesses many of the things one wants—and most of those which one does not. I had gone there with two other white men to look for gold. It is a marvelous country, Doctor; I do not think there is any other like it; such a country as was pictured in the old imaginative school of painting; a valley, through which winds a mist river flowing intangibly from a mirage through a canyon bridged by a rainbow; travelers’ palms, tree-ferns, lianas, dream-trees heavy with strange fruits and brilliant blossoms, in the distance mystic mountains rising as they recede, green yet forbidding, the homes of genii; their summits fantastic—the whole a beautiful, impossible, frightfully fascinating fairyland. This was that place where we went to look for gold.

“My two companions were failures—most gold-seekers are. I was not old enough to be a failure myself. No matter what the faults of these others, one did not deny their virtues. One was a Hollander, Vinckers, an engineer, a brilliant man, but one ready to step over the edge of heaven in sheer restlessness and a desire to see what was held by the abyss; the other was a Scotchman, disagreeable, moose, taciturn, harsh of speech and visage. Both held hearts of steel; they were the most quietly courageous men that I have ever known. I ask you to remember this, Doctor, in consideration of what came later. Their courage had been tried and proved in many desperate situations . . . Ach!” Leyden began to mutter again, shaping his thoughts with his tongue until I could with difficulty catch this thought—“the filament—the neuron—cut the sympathetic nerve in the neck of a horse and the animal begins to sweat upon the affected side; puncture the floor of the fourth ventricle of a dog—diabetes.” He raised his voice. “There is a little centre of thermogenesis, is there not, Doctor, the irritation of which will raise the temperature—

“We wandered through this shadow-land, this illusory place of promise whose inhabitants were oftentimes starving. Cannibals?—yes; many white men have been that through acute starvation; chronic only tends to confirm the vice. They were a strange, shy, kindly people to us, who understood such. The ‘Barbary Coast’ in San Francisco, the parks in Melbourne, or the water-front in Hong Kong, are all more dangerous than Papua. “We wandered through these people, accompanied by kindness, a whole tribe sometimes bearing our burdens until they reached a district dangerous to them, but where we made new friends. We wandered through this dreamland unmolested, walked with its fantastic peoples, black and brown and piebald; strayed in and out to the click-click-click of our little hammers, meeting dangers, it is true—the dangers which might confront a child walking blindfolded through a botanical garden filled with perils to its ignorance—and we tap-tap-tapped with our little hammers right up to the slopes of the Malang-o-mor the ‘Mountain of Fears’—and we tap-tap-tapped on its slopes of quartz and basalt, little thinking that we knocked at the door of an evil spirit.”

The bluff bows of our little ship smashed the short seas into a flat track of phosphorescence, and against the pale background I saw a tremor of some sort shake Leyden’s square shoulders, and it seemed to me that his voice was slightly breathless.

“‘The Mountain of Fears,’ so our Papuans called it, and threw down their burdens at the edge of the stream and refused point-blank to stir another step; more than that, they implored us to

go no farther ourselves, and a girl given to MacFarlane by a chief threw her arms around the knees of the rough old Gael and wailed like a stricken soul. An odd thing, that, Doctor, this cannibal girl given to the Scotchman a month before by this chief, to whom MacFarlane had given a harmonica on which he had first rendered ‘The Bonnie, Bonnie Banks of Loch Lomond’ in a manner which should, by right, have got him speared. The girl had fancied him, slaved for him, followed him everywhere like a dog, and had ended by softening him to—such an extent that he ceased to curse and his manner was less harsh—the elevating effect of a cannibal upon a Covenanter!—another inversion in this hallucinating country where the only actuality seemed the rapping of our little hammers.

“This girl, as I say, implored MacFarlane not to go on; for Vinckers and me she did not care; none of the women had much fancied us, while MacFarlane’s lack of comeliness was almost bizarre; they were obedient, of course—but that was about all.

“MacFarlane leered up at the great forbidding mountain as it thrust against the dome of the sky its summit of snowy quartz, a-glisten in the bright sunlight thirteen thousand feet above the level of the sea.

“‘A cauld slope yon—too cauld for a lass in naething but a kiltie. Ye’d best bide here ‘til I come.’ He spoke to her in the vernacular, with which we were all three familiar, and told her to await his return.

“It was hot in that valley—a stewpan, withering, stifling with the equatorial reek which wilts one to the bone; the nights stunk of fever. It was the southeast slope of the mountain which presented to us; and as we gazed up toward it from the little nest of trees where we had made our camp, the late sun blazed against its worn flank, and suddenly the broad, barren belt between the forest and the formation of quartz above the timber belt seemed to burst into flame and shone and sparkled and glittered as if flecked with scales of gold.

“‘An omen!’ cried Vinckers. ‘The Mountain of Hope—not the Mountain of Fears! Something tells me that we shall find gold there—veins of it, knuckles of it—perhaps the bones of the mountain are solid gold; why not, in such a country as this?’

“The sun dropped behind the high hills to the westward, swiftly, as it does on the equator, and even more swiftly the gray shadow ran from the foot to the summit of the great mountain. It was as if one saw the color fade in the face of a dying man, and it seemed to me that a cold draught struck down from the heights.

“‘The Mountain of Fears,’ said I—‘the Mountain of Fears,’ and as I stared at the monster on whose bristling hide we planned to crawl, parasites, searching for a spot to lodge our stings, the first shadow of foreboding swept over my spirits, just as the swift shadow had risen to throw its cold, blue light across the snowy quartz-field.

“In the valley we found the first signs of plenty; there were fruit and game and a sort of wild yam in abundance; and here we decided to rest for several days on the edge of the stream, for MacFarlane had a suppurating heel where he had trod upon a thorn, and Vinckers was suffering from a great nettle-rash upon his body. All three of us were hungry and our blood ran too thin to encounter the cold nights higher up the slope.

“We camped in a grove of trees which looked like the papaya and bore a fruit unlike any I have ever seen. It was shaped like an avacado, had a pulp like wax, or bone-marrow, which was greasy to the touch, oily, and held a faint flavor of sandal-wood. At first we tried it with caution, for our native friends would not eat anything which grew in the shadow of the Malang-o-mor; neither would they sleep in the narrow valley, but retired each evening to the edge of the forest on the farther slope.

“We rested and we slept, and we ate of the fruit, which I called myela, because I did not think that it had ever been described, and I called it so from its resemblance to marrow; also, we drank of the stream, which was a deep ruby, spring-cooled and fragrant, but of which none of the Papuans would drink excepting the girl, Tomba, given to MacFarlane by the chief. She ate and drank and shuddered and watched her lord narrowly, as if waiting for the curse to fall and wishful to avert it.

“In the early morning we hunted the game or clicked with our little hammers on the crumbling quartz through which the river gnawed its way. There was gold in the country, gold in the stream; one could pan enough dust in a light day’s work to pay highly for the labor. But we wanted more than dust—we wanted the pure metal which none doubted we should find on the virgin breast of the mountain, and our fancy saw us winding back to the sea with our native tribe deep-laden with the wealth of buccaneers winding out through defiles of mountain and forest, heavy with the plunder of the dread Malang-o-mor.

“Odd, Doctor; gold and dreams and sweat and death how they all mixed together to strike the average which maintains the trim of the world—” Leyden’s voice had sunk to muttering again, and he shivered, despite the humid warmth of the night.

“Daytimes we dwelt in Paradise and at night lay down to sleep, having first drunk of the stream, which we christened ‘Lethe,’ because on its banks we forgot the hardship and hunger of our long journey to the valley.

A Lethe it must have been, because each morning, when the late sun looked over the shoulder of the mountain and whipped up the blanket of mist stretched like a tent from the slope to the hills beyond, we forgot the miasmas of the night and the fetid fever smells and spores that spawned through the hours of hot darkness, and all of the while we ate more of the fat, oily fruit and less of other and more whole some things, for this fruit of itself appeared to satisfy all needs, and we looked at each other and laughed at the physical changes of the few days, for we were growing fat and flabby as paretics. We slept a great deal, too, days as well as nights, and the sleep was at first of that delicious kind which one enjoys in the moments between waking and rising—a conscious sleep, in which one feels the myriad renovative changes of tissue, when each little cell seems to stretch and tingle and feed against the waste of the coming day. Feed they did, for the flesh came back, full and soft, to our gaunt frames, and we looked at one another and laughed fat, gurgling laughs, and lay and smoked with our heads in the laps of the girls, and the tapping of our little hammers was heard but seldom on the flinty foot of the Mountain of Fears.

“The tribe had camped, as I have said, across the valley on the edge of the forest, but each day they came to see us, and we laughed at their surprise when they saw that all was well. We held them with beads and baubles and food and friendliness—chiefly the latter, for natives, like dogs, love to place allegiance with the higher mentality. One was puzzled that physical

need had not run counter to superstition, for despite the plenty of the valley we found no trace of other inhabitants.

“Perhaps, we had been three weeks in the valley, when one night I awoke dripping with perspiration and with a sense of nameless ill. ‘A nightmare,’ thought I, ‘of which the color is lost and only the depression remains.’ It held me broad awake—and then for the first time I fully realized the nauseous reek of the fever-fog. One smelled odors which seemed to emanate from the entrails of the earth. You know, Doctor, the nauseous, charnel stench of rotting insects and vegetation, with the fetid breath of the flower that issues from the mouth of a great, carnivorous plant? You have seen these trap-like flowers, if one may call them such, which grow in the botanical gardens of Demerara? Br’r’r’rgh! And as I lay, hot and cold and clammy, with a heavy weight upon my chest, and thought of how we had lain and breathed that thin effluvium, the vehicle for myriad infusoria and plasmodiæ, this hypochondriac fear became reasonable, and I marveled that we were still alive.

“Vinckers and MacFarlane slept heavily, torpidly, and their breathing was the stertorous gasping of drunkards. “We lay in hammocks of plaited grass under a shelter of thatch; the girl’s hammock was beside MacFarlane; and as I lay there, broad awake and still depressed, my lungs half drowned in the dense humor of the valley and my ears ringing from the clamorous insect mob without, I heard a stifled, whimpering cry—the moan of a little child who has been whipped for inheriting nerves. It struck a chill—there was a great deal that was chill in that place of hot fears, cold passions, joyless content and light-hearted sloth a place where one’s skin crept clammy while the bones were burning.

“‘Who is that!’ I asked, quite loudly, for I did not care if the others awoke.

“There came in answer the whimper of one too frightened to speak. Did you ever, as a child, Doctor, waken with the nightmare, afraid to cry out, afraid to move, tortured by the whimpers wrung out in reasonless terror? It was that kind of a sound.

“‘What is it!’ I asked.

“ ‘It is Tomba.’

“ ‘What is the matter with you?’ said I.

“ ‘I am afraid.’

“ ‘And what are you afraid of?’

“She found her voice then and began to tell me, but there my limited knowledge of the dialect failed, for I had no such linguistic scope as to-day, when one dialect more or less is simply a matter of ear and comparison. There was something in her speech of devils and death, and she kept repeating this and I do not know what besides—and then, as I was trying to reassure her as one might a child or a horse, less through the reason than the senses, the soothing of primitive sounds, a startling thing occurred. MacFarlane, whose breathing had become more labored, like that of a man rapidly climbing the ladder of consciousness from deep oblivion, gasped once or twice and awoke with a scream. Vinckers, roused with the echo ringing in his ears, awoke with a muffled shout—a strangled, bleating shout such as might come from a slaughtered animal. MacFarlane, but half awake, screamed again. At this Tomba’s breathless

terror found outlet in a shriek that swept out under the low mist, struck the mountain-side and quavered away in count less reverberations.

“Vinckers shouted again and leaped from his hammock.

“‘Be still, you fool!’ I cried, roughly.

“‘Wha—wha—wha—’ quavered MacFarlane.

“‘What’s the matter with you?’ I cried, impatiently. ‘Are you a couple of girls just out of a convent?’

“‘What is the matter?’ asked Vinckers, thickly. Tomba was sobbing hysterically.

“‘MacFarlane wakes up with a nightmare!’ said I, ‘and sets you howling like a maniac. ‘My own fright made me irritable.

“‘Odd,’ muttered Vinckers; ‘odd I had a nightmare, too.’

“‘Ye hag-ridden fule,’ snarled MacFarlane, ‘bawlin’ and yammerin’ like a bull! I had no nightmare mysel!’ He rolled heavily in his hammock. ‘Fetch me a drink o’ water, lass—water!’ he added, in the vernacular.

“Vinckers sat up in his hammock, let his feet hang over the side and, dropping his head between his heavy shoulders, stared down the valley. There was a moon somewhere behind the mist; this mist, diaphanous, vague, of any depth, yet lifted well above our heads, shone, not white, or colorless, as a vapor should, but a golden yellow; everything seemed golden, was becoming more golden daily the longer we stayed in that place of mockeries, and the reason of this was based on something more solid than a sentiment. What was the name of that drug, Doctor, which when ingested gives the yellow tinge to the vision? Santonica?—yes, perhaps that was it; perhaps its alkaloids were contained in that fatty fruit; perhaps it was only that the moon was one of those ripe, luscious, golden moons one sees on the equator. At any rate, the light came not pale and ghastly, as it should have been, but a luscious golden yellow; and that made it the more unearthly, as it illumined and gave a golden color to these dream objects the fan-palms, the vague rock-heaps, the vistas between which should have been ethereal, but, because of this succulent, sickly yellow light, were too material; and the aroma, which should have been dank, no doubt, but elusive, was a physical stench. Ach! a witch-fire would have burned in that place like a fat pine torch; one would have scorched one’s hands near a feu-follet; there was a ponderosity to this place of ghosts. Can you conceive a fat ghost, Doctor—a fat, unclean ghost, who has clanked around, dragging his ball and chain until the sweat pours down his fat face—a malodorous sweat—a sweat that physically offends while it frightens? Once in my youth, in Leipsic, I went into the anatomical laboratory, and there was on the table a fat subject—a woman—and she still wore some gold-washed rings and had some baubles in her ears of too mean value to appeal to the cupidity of whoever had fetched her there. Br’r’r’rgh! She was pathetic, of course, but I was not old enough to feel that then. I can never forget how much more awful she was to me than were the thin, meager, attenuated subjects who were consistent with the place. It was such a ripe, rotten ghastliness as this that was held in that valley which glimmered away at the foot of the Mountain of Fears.”

Leyden paused, quivering, shuddering. One did not need to see him silhouetted against the phosphorescence to see that he shuddered; he was in a tremor, and the light from the rook kamer striking his strong, keen, nervous face showed that it was damp, wet, viscid with a moisture other than the humor of the Gulf Stream. He was living the thing over again with all of his high-strung, Teuton nervousness; and suddenly it struck me that it was hardly decent to let him go on—that it was my duty to interrupt him, just as it has been my duty at times to interrupt the unpleasant indulgences of other morbid impulses. But, on the other hand, speech is the safety valve of the mind; also, it is just to sit passively and watch for the symptom which states the case.

“Vinckers observed this thing,” continued Leyden. “Vinckers was an unimaginative man, and consequently the impression on him was as it would have been upon a dry plate, or the tracings of a seismograph, or any other machine which records automatically without contributing anything of its own. Vinckers was rather low in the animal scale—by low I mean primitive; as a man he was a splendid specimen, but he was animal enough to get rather more from his instincts than from his reasoning—like most women. He watched this thing, this yellow light coming through the mist and touching with its sickly yellow tinge all of the fantastic objects in the picture that belonged to the imaginative school of painting. He looked quite steadily at the dream-trees, too symmetrical to be real; the fantastic rock shapes, too fancifully grotesque to be the work of nature; he observed the yellow light upon the sluggish stream, which flowed like molasses, and looked rather like it, too; the fringe of the forest—in fact, all of the component parts of the picture just as some morbid painting genius would have placed them—and Vinckers growled like a dog who sees something moving about the camp-fire invisible to his master.”

Leyden turned to me insistently, claiming my corroboration of all this that he had worked out through hypertrophied recollection. “Is it not true, Doctor, that logic supplants instinct; that as soon as we learned how to tell by deduction where the person we sought had gone we were no longer able to lay our noses to the ground and decide the matter?” He began to maunder again—his auto-philosophy which was so hard to follow. “There are plenty of plants in nature which would poison the animals of the section if in stinct did not prompt them to avoid these; a man will often eat of something and subsequently wonder at the cause of his derangement; the animal will know and avoid this thing. At that time I was conscious of a morbid physical condition, but was unable to trace its source. Vinckers, lacking imagination, knew at once. ‘Heaven,’ I heard him mutter, ‘was there ever such a mockery! We come to look for gold and we land in—quarantine!’ It struck me as a new idea and I almost laughed. Gold and death, sickness and disease! How appropriate that they should be unichromatic! But it was Vinckers’ next words which struck me. ‘It is that accursed corpse-wax!’ he muttered, ‘that greasy stuff that we have been growing fat on!’ Ugh! You see, Doctor, he was able to link physically cause and effect.

“MacFarlane began to mutter. Tomba brought him some water and he drank thirstily, swallowing with the audible gulps of a horse.

“‘I’m feverish,’ he said, panting from the long draught, ‘verra nervous and feverish. ‘Tis a feverish place, this.’

“‘It’s rotten with fever!’ growled Vinckers, who, like myself, spoke English better than the Scotchman. ‘It stinks of fever—smell it! We were fools to stay here so long.’

“ ‘We are a pack of lotus-eaters,’ said I. ‘You are right, Vinckers; it is this accursed stuff we have been eating—this adiposcere! We will get out of here to-morrow.’

“ ‘Do you feel as if your inside was filled with lead, Leyden?’ asked Vinckers.

“ ‘It is worse than that,’ said I—‘molten lead.’

“You see, Doctor, we had been living on this rich, fatty stuff, which certainly contained a great deal of oil and I do not know what else besides—narcotics, no doubt. You know the richness of an avocado? They will tell you in some places that this fruit produces biliousness, but I have never heard that it had a soporific effect, as undoubtedly had the myela fruit. Then we had taken no exercise.

“I think that night was hotter than most; we could not sleep, so up we got and smoked and discussed our plans for the future—at least, we started to discuss them, but even as we argued a lethargy came over us, and one by one we fell asleep, though dreading to do so and striving to keep awake through fear of another nightmare. An odd condition, Doctor, this drowsy fearsomeness; no doubt like a patient narcotized before an operation; dread fighting a drug until the latter triumphs and the patient whimpers off into fear-filled somnolence.

“The sun came to suck away the fever-mist and with it much of our dread. We laughed at the fears of the night and awaited the coming of the Papuans, but awaited in vain. I think, Doctor, that Tomba’s scream had floated across the valley, telephonic be neath the mist to reach the listeners in the hills. At any rate, no human thing came near us that day. Later, when the shadows began to lengthen again, we wandered out, Vinckers and I, prospecting towards the native camp—I with a rifle, watchful for game, Vinckers humming to himself an old Dutch tune, careless in the full force of the sunlight, wandering behind me and clicking on the rocks with his little hammer.

“I was strangely lacking in breath as I climbed the hillside; as for Vinckers, he halted at the end of a hundred steps and would go up no further. Back at our camp MacFarlane lay smoking, with his head in the lap of the girl. I alone toiled up the slope, soft in heart and fibre, the sweat pouring from me in streams, sodden, with the spring gone out of my ankles and everything about me of a strange, sickly yellow hue which darkened as my breath came faster.

“I found the Papuans departed, so back I went, blubbering with breathlessness, muttering, fatigued, depressed, sluggish with sleep. yinckers I found with his back against a rock, sleeping heavily. As I bent to rouse him my eyes fell upon a specimen which lay between his knees, and I saw that the little hammer had cleft it open to lay bare a thick band of virgin gold. Vinckers had tapped at the door of Fortune and she had opened, and Vinckers had looked within and—fallen asleep! Had the goddess ever a more loutish lover? He was sweating, too, in his sleep, and I saw where the sweat had left a yellow stain upon his neckerchief, and as the late sun struck him it seemed to me that his skin also was of a chromish tint. You know the flabby pallor of the clay-eater? It was like that, fat and flabby, but yellow rather than pale.

“Back we went to the camp, where MacFarlane still lay and smoked or slept with his ugly, shaggy head in the lap of Tomba.

“‘Gold!’ I said, ‘the mountain is full of it. ‘If it lies about loose here on the hillside, think of what it must be yonder where the mountain springs have done our hydraulic mining and washing in the same formation!’ I pointed above us to the flank of the Malang-o-mor; the late sun struck it aslant, throwing sharp, purple shadows into the numberless seams and fissures eroded in the crumbling crust; it flashed as it had each evening and glowed redly; high above, as the sun sank lower, the quartz beds threw back the deepening azure of the sky.

“‘Perhaps it is gold,’ said I, ‘that bright stuff which glitters so; at any rate there is gold to be had for the taking, while we lie here and bloat and rot and waken screaming in the night. Tomorrow we must go up.’

“ ‘I’m no fit mysel’, lad,’ said MacFarlane. ‘I hae the fever; I maun rest.’

“‘You will rest here through eternity,’ said I, ‘if you do not come away at once. You are yellow as a Chinaman and there’s not a line left in your face.’ And with the aid of the girl I set about preparing a meal.”

Leyden sucked in his breath sharply—filled his deep lungs like a man coming out of the dense, polluted atmosphere of a crowded car or clinic.

“That night I awoke thrice, and each time a cold terror was clamping my heart, until I seemed to shrivel in the utter obliteration of all else. The dread was featureless; there was no dream, only this crushing, numbing, withering fear which froze sound and motion; and I lay and listened to the quick, faint tick-tick-tick of my heart-beats and waited to die—and, instead, I slept again, even while sweating with fear. The last time I remained awake; and as conscience dawned fuller this fear sat upon the distorted objects of the place, the swinging bulks of my companions, the dark roof, and as I looked out into the lambent, mellow-lighted valley fear walked beneath the vague, symmetrical palms and the shimmering umbrella-trees and lurked in the recesses of the fantastic rocks. Fear walked on the water of the oily, sluggish river that flowed with the sheen of molten gold through raw, eroded banks where the lips of the rocks protruded like the ragged edge of an ulcer.

“I lay inert, paralyzed, and presently heard a faint, shuddering sigh; presently a moan, deep, hopeless, almost expiring.

“‘Are you awake, Vinckers?’ I managed to whisper, and my tongue could hardly articulate the words.

“ ‘Yes—are you, MacFarlane?’

“ ‘Ou aye, ou aye—what is it—oh, what is it, man?’

“‘Have you had the nightmare?’ I asked.

“ ‘Yes—without the dream—only the fear—what is it?’

“ ‘Ou, lads, we maun leave this place as soon as ‘tis light—’

“ ‘Hush! ah, hush!’ whispered Vinckers. ‘I am burning up—come over here, Leyden—I am afraid to move—I was never afraid before—never in my life—ah—what was that!’

“‘Ah, tush, man!’ MacFarlane’s rough voice choked. ‘D’ye want to drive the heart of a man from his body? Tomba, lass, Tomba!’ There was no reply.

“‘Tomba!’ said I, sharply. ‘Tomba—Tomba!’

“‘Hush!—ah, hush!’ whispered Vinckers.

“‘Why shall I hush!’ said I, and my voice was shaking. ‘Waken her, MacFarlane.’

“The Scotchman thrust out his great arm slowly, and in the faint yellow light I saw him snatch it quickly away; heard the choking rattle in his throat; felt my own heart flickering like a candle burned low.

“‘Ou—ou—ou—’

“‘Hush—hush—s’h’hh!’ whispered Vinckers.

“And then, Doctor” Leyden’s voice had sunk until one scarce caught the bitter mockery—”I did the bravest act of my life. I slid out of my hammock.” Leyden laughed in a way that sent a chill through me.

“Can you understand, Doctor? Do you know what fear is? Did you ever awake suddenly from a dreamless sleep with a devitalizing fear crushing the very blood out of your heart? No dream no recollection only the fear sometimes hung like a black mantle over the nearest object, no matter how familiar. Purely reasonless—the organ acting on the cell; an inversion of effect on cause. In our own case, if one presumed that our diet, or water, or the fever, or any other extrinsic cause had deranged the organ—perhaps the liver—and thus poisoned the cell—the single centre of Fear—as some drugs affect other centres—murderous—erotic as Charcot, I believe it is, demonstrates that the odor of certain perfumes will throw the hypnotized patient into paroxysms of fear—

“I never did a thing so difficult as to get on my feet and walk to the hammock of that poor girl. She was quite dead and the wet frost of the fear which had killed her lay moist and chill on face and breast. I did not dare to light a match to look at her; there is a limit, Doctor, to the courage of every man. I was never really frightened before; I can never remember being really frightened since; and my profession is one of countless risks to life. This was something far, far worse the reason stampeding with the will—

“Then the lethargy crept on again. I crawled back to my hammock and, still fighting the fear, fell asleep. The others slept before I—and I could hear them whining and whimpering like young puppies taken from the litter.

“I was the first to awaken when the light came. My fear was gone and I lay drenched in perspiration, yet comfortable, unwilling to rouse myself.

“‘Oh, the awfu’ nicht!’ moaned MacFarlane, and covered his face with his gnarled hands. Vinckers did not speak, but shouldered his kit.

“ ‘Let us go,’ he said, and we filed away from the place without looking back at the cannibal girl in the plaited hammock, her drawn face covered with the Scotchman’s only neckerchief.

“We wandered down the valley looking for a place to ford the stream and begin the ascent. We had no carriers, no goods, no especial hopes, but these things did not trouble us. We wandered along the banks of the dream-river and beneath the symmetrical trees, and filed between the fantastic rocks, which, from habit alone, we tapped with our little hammers; and still the sun had not looked over the edge of the eastern rampart of the valley, and we journeyed in the shadow of the Mountain of Fears. The Mountain of Fears—the Mountain of Fears—and nothing but peace on every hand! Nothing of harm—no danger of man or beast, nothing of heat, nothing of cold—a misty, dreamy peace; the dreads of the night supplanted by an apathetic shame which forbade discussion of these things. As for Tomba—why, she died of fever, poor girl—what else?

“We wandered down the valley and soon we came to a ford; there we crossed and toiled on up the slope of the mountain—up, up, up, panting, sweating, breathless, not clear as to purpose, but struggling to get up because—we did not know! As we climbed we tapped at the stones, because we were used to tapping and chipping with our little hammers, and when we halted for the night we were high up on a wooded plateau, and the air was fine and thin and sweet with healthy odors of moss and fern and clean flowers. We were on the hip of the Mountain of Fears.

“We crouched on the edge of the precipice and peered down into the valley as the sun slipped over the crest of the opposite hills and drew after it the curtain of mist which hid the greasy river and the unreal trees and the jumping rocks, which from above looked like Titan children frozen at play. The mist hid all of these things, but now we were above in stead of beneath it. Before it grew denser it formed a thin, flat pale through which one might look and see these objects, symmetrical and bizarre, fantastic and uncouth, which lay beneath, as one looks down through the thin water-line of a clear but stagnant pool and sees the fairy-like structures of an alien element. ‘To-night,’ thought I, ‘we shall not slumber in that cistern.’ It seemed to me in that thin, bracing air, that we had wriggled to the surface like the larvae of mosquitoes, and, after incessantly gyrating up and down, had crawled clear and grown our wings in the drier medium. But even while thinking these things the sun slipped down behind the opposite hills, the mist thickened, a cold draught sucked around the side of the mountain, and I heard Vinckers let out his breath with a shudder. I had noticed that each evening we grew depressed as soon as the sun was gone.

“‘What is the matter?’ I asked.

“ ‘Oh, God!’ he shuddered. ‘Don’t you see that it is all getting yellow again—a nasty, greenish yellow?’

“‘Ou aye,’ said MacFarlane, ‘but it has been yellow all day!’

“It had a yellowish tinge to me, Doctor, but I had tried to persuade myself that it was something in the spectrum of that equatorial sun and the vivid greens which filled the valley. There was no denying that as the sunrays left the air the yellows came out with frightful intensity, and to my imagination it seemed as if we were cursed with the curse of Midas—a curse because we had profaned the Malang-o-mor, except that it was not necessary to touch a thing to turn it into gold. Of course, at that time I knew nothing of such things as xanthopsia,

and my mind rebelled at aught of a superstitious character. The result was that I became worried and confused—like a dog listening at the receiver of a telephone to a sourceless voice. With Vinckers and MacFarlane it was different; they were of the unimaginative type which goes at one leap from stubborn disbelief to frenzied superstition—and just because everything was turning yellow they would not raise their voices above a whisper.

“We had practically nothing wherewith to camp; in fact, we had come to wandering through that dream-country with only dream-needs the needs of an opium-eater or any other slave of the lamp. Of course, we had some of the fruit—the stuff that grew on the Mountain of Fears—I have never seen it anywhere else. We made a shelter and crept in to sleep.

“I suppose that it was hot enough, but for a month we had dwelt in the steam-room of a Turkish bath. Being younger and stronger, I had given my poncho to Vinckers, who had felt the chill of the higher air. Perhaps it was this circumstance which brought me through the night with my reason, for the cold wakened me before that moment of low-ebbing vitality which comes between midnight and dawn. I awoke shivering, dew-damp with the terror of the night before, and as I lay there waiting I heard the other two twitching and muttering. I suppose that I should have awakened them.

“The moonlight, which should have been clear on the mountain, was yellow as in the valley below; the moon was still high, and we lay in the shadow, but as I waited it passed the zenith and began its swift descent, and soon the lower rim was cut by the edge of our leafy roof. For an hour no sound had come from the others, no stir; they had lain like dead men; and in my abject nervelessness I was afraid to investigate, but waited until the moon should sink lower and look directly into the place. MacFarlane was nearest me, and as the moon sank lower the yellow light crept up his body, which was motionless, as if carved in stone. It reached a hand lying palm downward on his thigh, and I saw that the back glistened with moisture. The sharp, golden moon-ray crept higher, and I watched breathlessly for his face, my own still in the shadow. His straggling beard turned golden; I saw his yellow teeth gleaming, the bristling lips drawn up and the breath hissing between in quick gasps. ‘He is having the nightmare,’ I thought, and might have found courage to awaken him, but at that moment the light shone full in his face, and I saw that his eyes were wide open, fixed, staring, brimming with an anguish of dread before which my soul shrank. He was staring straight in front of him at Vinckers, who was stretched out at his side, and as I watched, the moonlight fell on his face and showed his eyes also wide open and staring straight into those of MacFarlane.

“For perhaps five minutes—five hours it seemed to me—these two lay inert, stricken paralytic from dread, gazing each one into the crazed eyes of the other, motionless, soundless—while I, watching from the shadow, saw the water trickle down their yellow faces in little, golden drops. Then, with a consciousness of the danger of this thing, I tried to break the spell—and did!

“‘Vinckers!’ I croaked, and before the sound of my voice had died away Vinckers screamed—a rasping, throat-splitting scream, straight into MacFarlane’s face. MacFarlane gurgled and his eyes opened and shut rapidly. Vinckers screamed again—and at this something inside me which I was striving to hold in check, some irresistible impulse, seemed suddenly to tear away—and sweep my will before it—at least, this is a nice way of putting it, Doctor—”

Into Leyden's voice there had crept again that biting mockery which was almost jaunty in tone.

"It is so," he continued, "that one autoanalytic—a student of psychology—his own—might refer to these subjective symptoms. The brutal stranger watching this phenomenon would spell it in five letters—p-a-n-i-c—an elemental emotion which can be the source of much learned argumentation—and stamp the lives out of women and little children—and grab all of the lifeboats—and has! Yet it is an emotion quite common to certain low types of humanity, the kind who do their thinking with their spinal cord—and it is one of those lovely primitive, primordial, brutal, unregenerate and degraded emotions of which certain others of its type, such as ungoverned lust and anger and revenge, are much admired by many modern devotees, the bestial primitive—to my mind all of these things sweep together through the same sluice."

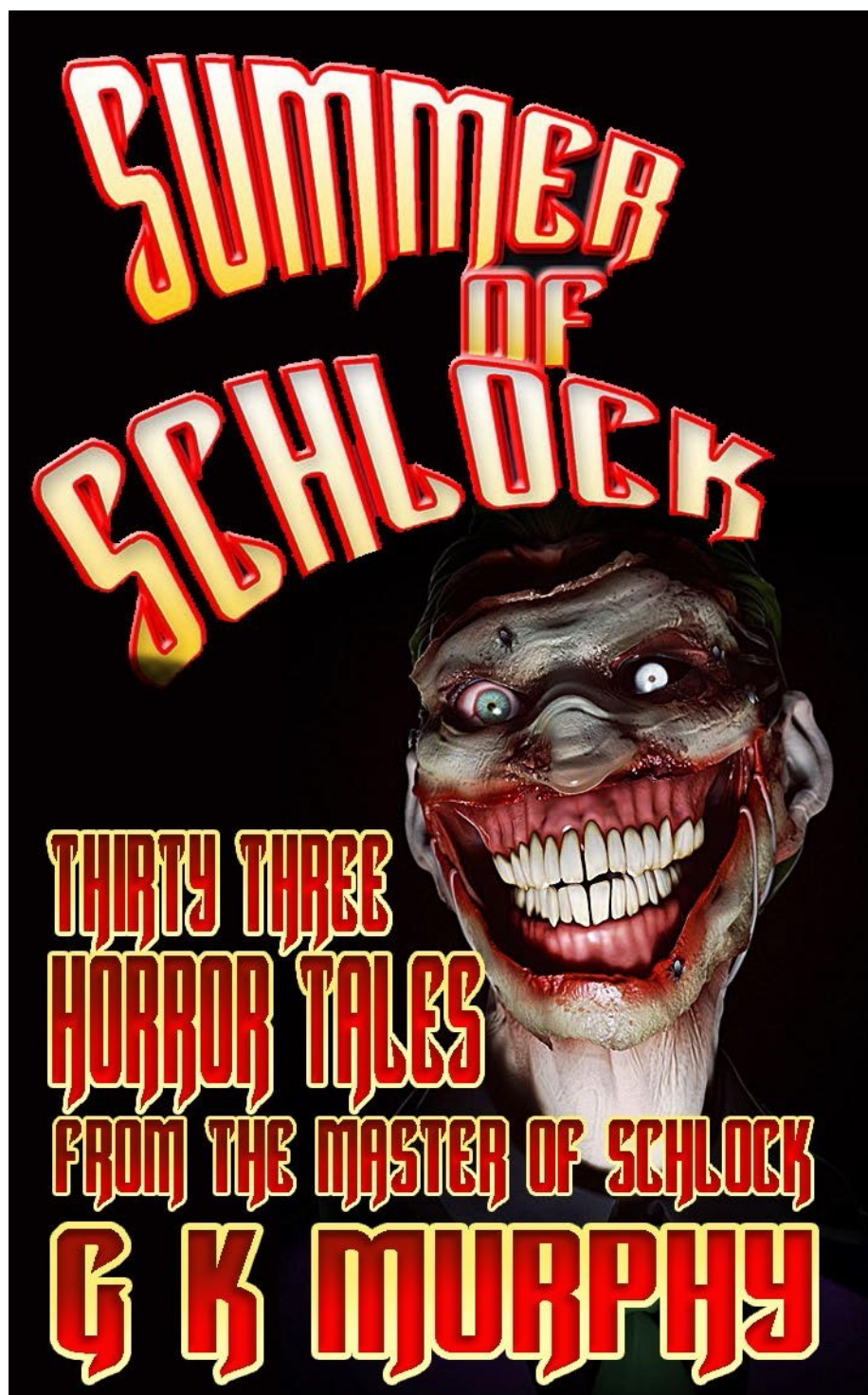
There are no words which will convey the bitterness of Leyden's tone; mockery soared high in comparison.

"B'r'r'rgh! how I loathe all such unicellular impulses in a man—a finished animal product! And that night on that mountain I yelped and howled in fear with those other two hairy animals—and I think that we fought and bit and struggled, for the next morning we were masses of minor wounds. Yet so far had we harked back on the trail of our savage forbears, driven screaming before that primitive and degraded passion of fear, that none of us was badly hurt!—which was even more shameful. I suppose, Doctor, that our terror was too elemental and reasonless to lead us to use weapons, whereas our limbs lacked the strength to enable us to kill each other with our naked hands; so that, instead of digging out each other's hearts with our finger-nails, we suffered most from skin-scratches, upon which the flies settled. Ach!—I should like to say an obscene word, Doctor! Let's smoke!—let's have a drink!

"Oh, yes—we all came away the next day. Nothing happened to us—just as there was nothing to be afraid of. Please tell me that it was all due to a toxic action on the centre of Fear—that is what I tell myself—and what a savant of Leipsic was good enough to tell me. Nevertheless, when I met MacFarlane in Sydney four years ago I crossed to the other side of the street—and he looked once and then away. There are some things in a man's past difficult to face; most difficult in mine is that last night on the broad hip of the Mountain of Fears."

THE END

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THE PALE MAN by Julius Long

I have not yet met the man in No. 212. I do not even know his name. He never patronizes the hotel restaurant, and he does not use the lobby. On the three occasions when we passed each other by, we did not speak, although we nodded in a semi-cordial, noncommittal way. I should like very much to make his acquaintance. It is lonesome in this dreary place. With the exception of the aged lady down the corridor, the only permanent guests are the man in No. 212 and myself. However, I should not complain, for this utter quiet is precisely what the doctor prescribed.

I wonder if the man in No. 212, too, has come here for a rest. He is so very pale. Yet I can not believe that he is ill, for his paleness is not of a sickly cast, but rather wholesome in its ivory clarity. His carriage is that of a man enjoying the best of health. He is tall and straight. He walks erectly and with a brisk, athletic stride. His pallor is no doubt congenital, else he would quickly tan under this burning, summer sun.

He must have travelled here by auto, for he certainly was not a passenger on the train that brought me, and he checked in only a short time after my arrival. I had briefly rested in my room and was walking down the stairs when I encountered him ascending with his bag. It is odd that our venerable bell-boy did not show him to his room.

It is odd, too, that, with so many vacant rooms in the hotel, he should have chosen No. 212 at the extreme rear. The building is a long, narrow affair three stories high. The rooms are all on the east side, as the west wall is flush with a decrepit business building. The corridor is long and drab, and its stiff, bloated paper exudes a musty, unpleasant odor. The feeble electric bulbs that light it shine dimly as from a tomb. Revolted by this corridor, I insisted vigorously upon being given No. 201, which is at the front and blessed with southern exposure. The room clerk, a disagreeable fellow with a Hitler mustache, was very reluctant to let me have it, as it is ordinarily reserved for his more profitable transient trade. I fear my stubborn insistence has made him an enemy.

If only I had been as self-assertive thirty years ago! I should now be a full-fledged professor instead of a broken-down assistant. I still smart from the cavalier manner in which the president of the university summarily recommended my vacation. No doubt he acted for my best interests. The people who have dominated my poor life invariably have.

Oh, well, the summer's rest will probably do me considerable good. It is pleasant to be away from the university. There is something positively gratifying about the absence of the graduate student face.

If only it were not so lonely! I must devise a way of meeting the pale man in No. 212. Perhaps the room clerk can arrange matters.

I have been here exactly a week, and if there is a friendly soul in this miserable little town, he has escaped my notice. Although the tradespeople accept my money with flattering eagerness, they studiously avoid even the most casual conversation. I am afraid I can never cultivate their society unless I can arrange to have my ancestors recognized as local residents for the last hundred and fifty years.

Despite the coolness of my reception, I have been frequently venturing abroad. In the back of my mind I have cherished hopes that I might encounter the pale man in No. 211. Incidentally, I wonder why he has moved from No. 212. There is certainly little advantage in coming only one room nearer to the front. I noticed the change yesterday when I saw him coming out of his new room.

We nodded again, and this time I thought I detected a certain malign satisfaction in his somber, black eyes. He must know that I am eager to make his acquaintance, yet his manner forbids overtures. If he wants to make me go all the way, he can go to the devil. I am not the sort to run after anybody. Indeed, the surly diffidence of the room clerk has been enough to prevent me from questioning him about his mysterious guest.

I wonder where the pale man takes his meals. I have been absenting myself from the hotel restaurant and patronizing the restaurants outside. At each I have ventured inquiries about the man in No. 210. No one at any restaurant remembered his having been there. Perhaps he has entrée into the Brahmin homes of this town. And again, he may have found a boarding-house. I shall have to learn if there be one.

The pale man must be difficult to please, for he has again changed his room. I am baffled by his conduct. If he is so desirous of locating himself more conveniently in the hotel, why does he not move to No. 202, which is the nearest available room to the front?

Perhaps I can make his inability to locate himself permanently an excuse for starting a conversation. "I see we are closer neighbors now," I might casually say. But that is too banal. I must await a better opportunity.

He has done it again! He is now occupying No. 209. I am intrigued by his little game. I waste hours trying to fathom its point. What possible motive could he have? I should think he would get on the hotel people's nerves. I wonder what our combination bellhop-chambermaid thinks of having to prepare four rooms for a single guest. If he were not stone-deaf, I would ask him. At present I feel too exhausted to attempt such an enervating conversation.

I am tremendously interested in the pale man's next move. He must either skip a room or remain where he is, for a permanent guest, a very old lady, occupies No. 208. She has not budged from her room since I have been here, and I imagine that she does not intend to.

I wonder what the pale man will do. I await his decision with the nervous excitement of a devotee of the track on the eve of a big race. After all, I have so little diversion.

Well, the mysterious guest was not forced to remain where he was, nor did he have to skip a room. The lady in No. 208 simplified matters by conveniently dying. No one knows the cause of her death, but it is generally attributed to old age. She was buried this morning. I was

among the curious few who attended her funeral. When I returned home from the mortuary, I was in time to see the pale man leaving her room. Already he has moved in.

He favored me with a smile whose meaning I have tried in vain to decipher. I can not but believe that he meant it to have some significance. He acted as if there were between us some secret that I failed to appreciate. But, then, perhaps his smile was meaningless after all and only ambiguous by chance, like that of the Mona Lisa.

My man of mystery now resides in No. 207, and I am not the least surprized. I would have been astonished if he had not made his scheduled move, I have almost given up trying to understand his eccentric conduct. I do not know a single thing more about him than I knew the day he arrived. I wonder whence he came. There is something indefinably foreign about his manner. I am curious to hear his voice. I like to imagine that he speaks the exotic tongue of some far-away country. If only I could somehow inveigle him into conversation! I wish that I were possessed of the glib assurance of a college boy, who can address himself to the most distinguished celebrity without batting an eye. It is no wonder that I am only an assistant professor.

I am worried. This morning I awoke to find myself lying prone upon the floor. I was fully clothed. I must have fallen exhausted there after I returned to my room last night.

I wonder if my condition is more serious than I had suspected. Until now I have been inclined to discount the fears of those who have pulled a long face about me. For the first time I recall the prolonged hand-clasp of the president when he bade me good-bye from the university. Obviously he never expected to see me alive again.

Of course I am not that unwell. Nevertheless, I must be more careful. Thank heaven I have no dependents to worry about. I have not even a wife, for I was never willing to exchange the loneliness of a bachelor for the loneliness of a husband.

I can say in all sincerity that the prospect of death does not frighten me. Speculation about life beyond the grave has always bored me. Whatever it is, or is not, I'll try to get along.

I have been so preoccupied about the sudden turn of my own affairs that I have neglected to make note of a most extraordinary incident. The pale man has done an astounding thing. He has skipped three rooms and moved all the way to No. 203. We are now very close neighbors. We shall meet oftener, and my chances for making his acquaintance are now greater.

I have confined myself to my bed during the last few days and have had my food brought to me. I even called a local doctor, whom I suspect to be a quack. He looked me over with professional indifference and told me not to leave my room. For some reason he does not want me to climb stairs. For this bit of information he received a ten-dollar bill which, as I directed him, he fished out of my coat pocket. A pickpocket could not have done it better.

He had not been gone long when I was visited by the room clerk. That worthy suggested with a great show of kindly concern that I use the facilities of the local hospital. It was so modern and all that. With more firmness than I have been able to muster in a long time, I gave him to understand that I intended to remain where I am. Frowning sullenly, he stiffly retired. The doctor must have paused long enough downstairs to tell him a pretty story. It is obvious that he is afraid I shall die in his best room.

The pale man is up to his old tricks. Last night, when I tottered down the hall, the door of No. 202 was ajar. Without thinking, I looked inside. The pale man sat in a rocking-chair idly smoking a cigarette. He looked up into my eyes and smiled that peculiar, ambiguous smile that has so deeply puzzled me. I moved on down the corridor, not so much mystified as annoyed. The whole mystery of the man's conduct is beginning to irk me. It is all so inane, so utterly lacking in motive.

I feel that I shall never meet the pale man. But, at least, I am going to learn his identity. Tomorrow I shall ask for the room clerk and deliberately interrogate him.

I know now. I know the identity of the pale man, and I know the meaning of his smile.

Early this afternoon I summoned the room clerk to my bedside.

"Please tell me," I asked abruptly, "who is the man in No. 202?"

The clerk stared wearily and uncomprehendingly.

"You must be mistaken. That room is unoccupied."

"Oh, but it is," I snapped in irritation. "I myself saw the man there only two nights ago. He is a tall, handsome fellow with dark eyes and hair. He is unusually pale. He checked in the day that I arrived."

The hotel man regarded me dubiously, as if I were trying to impose upon him.

"But I assure you there is no such person in the house. As for his checking in when you did, you were the only guest we registered that day."

"What? Why, I've seen him twenty times! First he had No. 212 at the end of the corridor. Then he kept moving toward the front. Now he's next door in No. 202."

The room clerk threw up his hands.

"You're crazy!" he exclaimed, and I saw that he meant what he said.

I shut up at once and dismissed him. After he had gone, I heard him rattling the knob of the pale man's door. There is no doubt that he believes the room to be empty.

Thus it is that I can now understand the events of the past few weeks. I now comprehend the significance of the death in No. 207. I even feel partly responsible for the old lady's passing.

After all, I brought the pale man with me. But it was not I who fixed his path. Why he chose to approach me room after room through the length of this dreary hotel, why his path crossed the threshold of the woman in No. 207, those mysteries I can not explain.

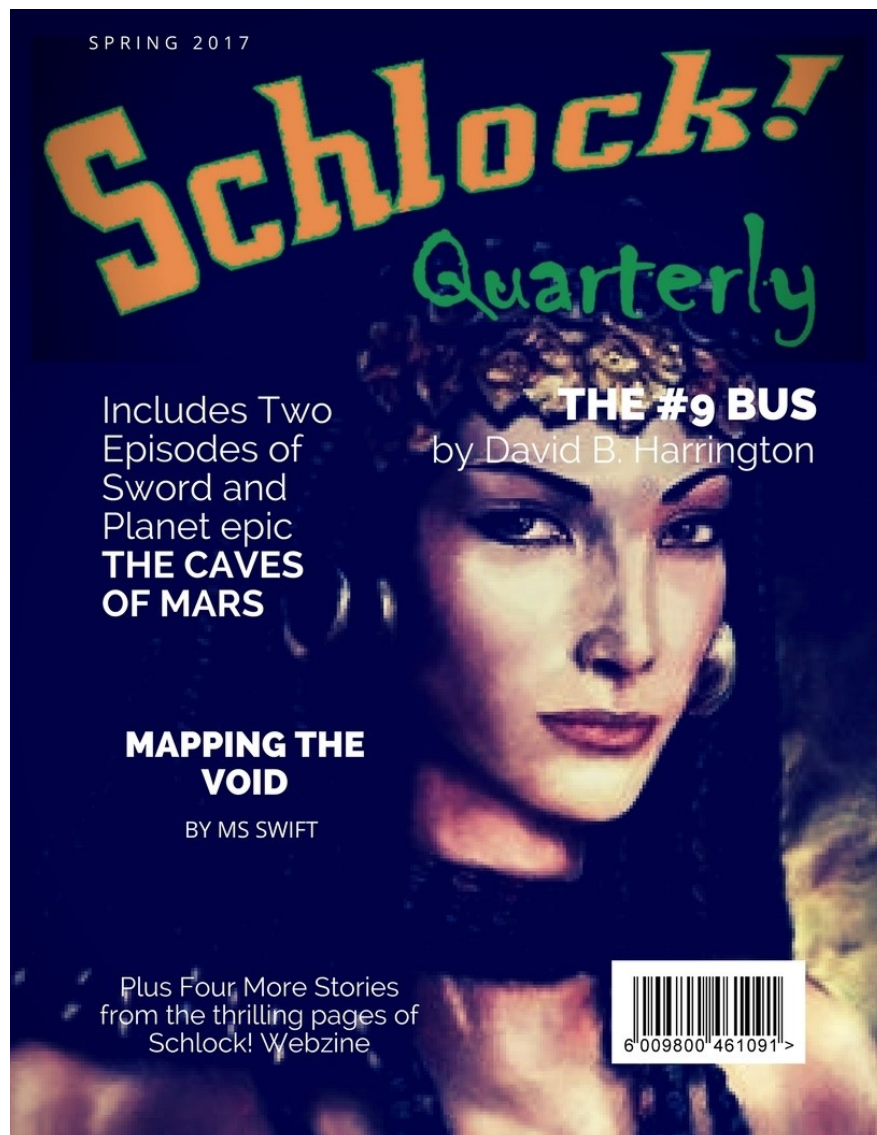
I suppose I should have guessed his identity when he skipped the three rooms the night I fell unconscious upon the floor. In a single night of triumph he advanced until he was almost to my door.

He will be coming by and by to inhabit this room, his ultimate goal. When he comes, I shall at least be able to return his smile of grim recognition.

Meanwhile, I have only to wait beyond my bolted door.

The door swings slowly open....

THE END



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HELL'S BAILIFFS by Gavin Chappell

The three animated statues stood in the doorway, surveying the assembly within the banqueting hall. The villagers screamed in panic at the unnatural sight and scrambled from their seats.

Mayor Gall turned to the four youths. 'What are they? Golems?'

'We met this evil wizard...' Percy began. The statues came trampling towards the high seat. The assembled villagers rushed towards the far end of the hall.

'And slew him, yes, we know all about your heroism,' said Mayor Gall impatiently. 'Are these his creatures?'

'Well, this was a different evil wizard, actually,' Percy tried to explain. 'You meet a lot of them in this job...'

'Forget that!' Brian shrieked. 'Bring me my broadsword!'

'It's a bastard sword, Brian,' Norman carped.

'I don't care what kind of sword it is,' Brian replied. 'Bring it to me! I am Brian the Destroyer!'

'You heard him!' said Mayor Gall, turning to his fleeing villagers. 'Get our heroes their weapons! Do not fear! The slayers of evil wizards will easily prevail against golems.'

'Wanna bet?' Gerald muttered.

Impatient, as no one came forward immediately with his sword, Brian leapt over the trestle table and ran to the open fire where haunches of beef roasted on a spit. He seized the spit, tore it off its mount, and brandished it like a sword, sending fat and hunks of meat flying in all directions.

The statues faced him emotionlessly.

Brian screamed a wordless battle cry and rushed them, swinging the spit back and forth. One haunch flew off the end and sent the headless statue cannoning into another. Both went down with a thump, and the third statue was knocked back.

Before Brian could push it over, the statue went down with a clatter and rolled across the flagstones towards him. It knocked Brian's feet from under him and as he fell, the spit went flying. Before Brian could recover from his fall, the statue rose and straddled Brian, pinning him to the ground. It lifted a marble fist to punch him in the face.

There was a *clong!!!* as a flying punchbowl collided with the statue and sent it toppling backwards. Gerald dusted off his hands and leapt down from the table.

The headless statue had reached its knees, but as it tried to rise further, Percy ran the length of the trestle table, leapt up, grabbed the chandelier and swung himself straight into the thing, sending it spinning back into the other statue, smashing—literally—its legs from beneath it.

‘Their legs!’ Percy shouted, realisation sinking in. Without their legs, the statues were helpless... ‘Break their legs!’

‘Okay, mate!’ Gerald shouted.

He’d found Brian’s spit and now he heaved it up, wincing at the heat of the slowly-cooling metal, and swung it at the statue Percy had sent flying, now rising to its feet again. He hit it right in the crotch—painful, if it hadn’t been made of marble—and it went flying back again. This time it landed in the great hearth and flames leapt up around it. It gave a strange creaking, cracking scream, the only noise they ever heard from the statues—as its marble blackened and cracked. Then it stopped moving.

Norman had watched all this open-mouthed from where he still sat. It had been only seconds since Brian had vaulted the trestle. Now only the headless statue was still in a position to fight, but it was pursuing the weaponless Brian.

‘Excuse me,’ he said to Mayor Gall with a polite cough.

He snatched the heavy gold chain from round the startled man’s neck, turned, swung it round and round in the air then hurled it at the legs of the statue. Like a bolas, the mayor’s chain wrapped itself around the thing’s ankles and dragged it to the ground. As the statue lay thrashing helplessly, Gerald advanced with the spit, lifted it high then brought it whacking down. The statue shattered under his repeated assault.

Brian halted and looked back in amazement. Percy gazed astounded at the incapacitated statues. Gerald stood dazed, staring at the huge spit in his hands and the broken statue at his feet. Norman investigated the statue in the hearth. No signs of life. They had won.

Mayor Gall came forward. Solemnly, he shook them all by the hand in turn.

‘If before I had ever doubted that you were heroes,’ he said as the servants came forward to clean up the mess and the villagers returned, dazed, to their places, ‘then my doubts have been dispelled by your magnificent performance tonight. Surely, whatever Tito’s quandary, you are the ones who will be able to aid him.’ He turned to the taverner. ‘You have seen with your own eyes what heroes these lads are. Now tell us your tale.’

Tito rose, smiling in amazement at the youths, and addressed the dumbfounded assembly.

‘My hostelry lies under a curse,’ he told them. ‘I need heroes accustomed to dealing with supernatural menaces, warlocks and monsters, to aid me. That is why I came to Wishbone Village, in the hope of finding brave adventurers. And how my luck has turned!’

Percy looked up from where he had been laughing at one of Gerald’s jokes. ‘What do you mean?’ he asked warily.

‘Listen,’ said Tito, ‘and I will tell you my tale.’

They listened. A chill gripped Percy's heart. It had been a tough fight with the statues and he was appalled by the idea that they would once again be obliged to face supernatural horror. But how could they refuse after receiving all this hospitality from the villagers?

'In my work,' Tito explained, 'it is sometimes hard to keep the wolf from the door.'

'Of course, master taverner,' Mayor Gall broke in, 'the Hostelry of the Four Ravens is at the back of beyond. Other than the king's highway that leads to the Mountain Duchies, it is wilderness. There must be many wolves.'

Tito smiled grimly. 'I speak metaphorically, of course,' he said. 'Although wolves and indeed werewolves are not unknown in the forests beyond the king's highway. No, I mean that the costs of carting malt, meat, and spices to my remote hostelry often come close to outweighing the profits of my labours. Other than at the height of the trading season, it is a parlous trade.'

'I try to grow as much as I can, yet the ground is useless for growing grain, and much of my trade is in barley beer and wheat bread.' He shrugged. 'You don't wish to hear my troubles. Not my everyday troubles. You want to know about the talisman. And its curse.'

'The talisman?' It was a chorus from the listening villagers.

'What's a talisman?' Percy muttered.

'Like an amulet,' Mayor Gall whispered to him. Percy was none the wiser.

'A sorcerer came to my tavern,' Tito went on. 'Clearly such: a tall, bearded man in a long robe covered in stars, wearing a pointed hat. He racked up a lengthy bill. I had marked score upon score on his slate when evening came, but when I asked him to pay the reckoning, he laughed at me, villagers of Wishbone Village. He laughed at me, told me he was destitute. This is what a lone taverner must endure, out in the wilds.'

The villagers sighed in dismay.

Tito continued. 'I said that he would have to find some way to pay. He smiled, hiccoughed, and said that he had something that was worth more than gold or jewels.'

"What's that?" I asked him.

"Protection from thieves and from fire", said the sorcerer with a shrug.

'I smiled thinly. "Of course I want protection from thieves—and from penniless wanderers who can't pay their reckoning."

"No need to be unpleasant," whined the sorcerer. "Here!" He produced a piece of star metal forged in the form of a trident, with a strange inscription of glyphs upon its surface. "This is the talisman of Zorn! He is an arch-demon who will protect you from fire and theft."

Percy gathered that a talisman was a kind of magic charm.

‘I sneered cynically, although I was tempted. Fire is a terrible threat in a wood-built tavern out in the wilds. And theft must be responsible for most of my losses; some of my guests are less than honest. “How will this... arch-demon protect me?” I asked.

“That is a mystery,” the sorcerer replied disapprovingly, “which even the Wise cannot explain. But the man who owns the amulet... and makes the necessary offerings... will be protected from fire and theft.”

‘The sorcerer showed me several parchments endorsing his claims, some of them dating back to ancient days. “And you have no other means of payment?” I asked. He asserted that this was truth. I sighed, although frankly the ownership of such a magical item seemed worth more to me than a few stoups of ale.’

‘So, master taverner, you accepted?’ asked Mayor Gall.

Tito nodded. ‘What else could I do, mayor? Insist he washed the dishes? This was worth more, far more, it seemed. I signed the contract that he produced from beneath his robes.’

‘What went wrong?’ asked Percy.

‘What went wrong? O hero,’ Tito said sadly, ‘what went wrong... The next week, the sorcerer returned. Sober, dressed in a new robe, he reiterated the terms of the diabolical contract. I must make monthly offerings to the arch-demon Zorn or his protection would be withdrawn—then his curse would fall upon me.

‘The contract, I saw, stipulated that the offerings were at the arch-demon’s discretion. “Offerings?” I asked.’

“A black rooster,” the sorcerer replied. “Grant me a black rooster every moon and I will offer it unto Zorn. Then he will protect you. But you must keep making the offerings.’

“Very well!” I laughed, thinking a black rooster a small payment for such protection. “But what if I do not keep up the offerings?”

‘The sorcerer indicated a clause in the small print of the diabolical contract that said that the offerings would increase in worth if I were unable to maintain them at any point. I frowned at this, but told myself; that I would never have to face that eventuality.’

Tito looked mournfully at the assembled company. ‘As you can imagine, such was not the case,’ he told them. ‘A time came toward the end of winter when I could not put my hands of a black rooster for love or money. The sorcerer was regretful, but left without causing any trouble when I explained my predicament. He returned the next month, however, and demanded that this time I offer up a goat. Such I managed to accomplish, since by then I had the money. But from then onwards, I had trouble making the offerings. And whenever I did, they grew greater. They grew worse.’ A shadow seemed to cross his face.

The assembly moaned their sympathy. Tito shook his head in despair. ‘Now, however, it has reached the point where I am close to ruin. Every groat I make in the hostelry must go into procuring offerings. And now I have nothing.’

‘What happens now?’ asked Mayor Gall.

Tito sighed. ‘That is exactly why it was such a lucky chance that heroes are in the neighbourhood!’ he said. ‘Last time the sorcerer appeared, he was furious with me because I could not make the offering. He said that at the next full moon, I would receive a visit from the emissaries of Zorn. At midnight, they would settle my reckoning.’

‘How?’ asked Percy.

Tito shook his head. ‘He did not say.’

Percy rose. As the taverner had gone on, he had become more and more interested in the story. His Nan had got into the same kind of mess after the recession. It hadn’t involved demons and offerings, just insurance salesmen. But she’d ended up having all her belongings taken by bailiffs. It looked like Tito was faced with hell’s own bailiffs.

‘Okay, what do you want us to do?’ he asked.

‘They will come for me on the night of the full moon,’ said Tito. ‘That is three days from now. Enough time to drive back to the hostelry. They will send demonic servitors to drag me off to hell. But we all know that when demons manifest themselves, they are formed of flesh and may die just as anything of flesh may die.’

‘Is that right?’ Norman asked Gerald.

Gerald shrugged. ‘Buggered if I know...’

‘What I need are heroes, of the kind who can slaughter golems,’ Tito added.

‘What are golems?’ Percy asked, puzzled.

Tito looked around him. ‘Inanimate objects animated by sorcery. Like those statues that you destroyed. Surely every child knows that?’

Percy scratched his head. ‘Of course I know that!’ he said airily. ‘Just checking. Go on.’

‘Help me!’ Tito asked. ‘Come to my hostelry. You will have free bed and board and all the hospitality I can provide. In return, I ask you to fight off the demonic servitors when they come.’

Mayor Gall turned to Percy, his face alight. ‘Our heroes will leap at the chance, I’m sure!’ he exclaimed.

Percy looked at his friends. ‘What do you say, guys?’

Gerald shrugged awkwardly. He looked beggily at Norman. Norman said bluntly, ‘I say we should help the master taverner!’

‘Yeah!’ said Brian. ‘Let these servitors feel my mighty weapon and they’ll soon bugger off back to the hell they crawled out of!’

‘Oh, thanks, Percy!’ Gerald said huffily, frowning at him. ‘Now look what you’ve done... We’re supposed to be crossing the northern wastes in search of Photogeneia and now we’re mixed up in someone else’s problems.’

‘Such is your quest?’ asked Tito airily. ‘Perhaps I can help you, in return for your aid.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Gerald.

‘Merchant caravans bound for Trinovant pass my hostelry,’ Tito replied. ‘Those who do not wish to pay the tolls of the Wagon Road and are willing to brave the dangers of the king’s highway. I may be able to secure you a place on such a caravan, that will take you through the Mountain Duchies and over into Trinovant. From there you will be able to set out for the northern wastes.’

‘Okay...’ said Gerald. ‘How often do these caravans go past?’ He had an image of some kind of motorhome, but that couldn’t be right.

‘They will be more common now,’ said Mayor Gall encouragingly. ‘Now that the barbarians have sacked Kashamash and are at large throughout the plains.’

Percy looked at Gerald. ‘Come on, mate,’ he said. ‘There’s something in it for us!’

Gerald shrugged violently. ‘That’s not what I’m worried about. I just don’t like the sound of these ‘ere demonic servitors.’

‘So it’s settled?’ Tito asked. Percy looked at Gerald again. Slowly, grudgingly, Gerald nodded.

‘Okay then. We fight the arch-demon Zorn and all his demonic servitors! If we survive, we go home. Okay, you’ve convinced me! Let’s eat, for fuck’s sake.’

Percy copied Gerald and they all began to tuck in. But the food was tasteless in his mouth. Despite his initial enthusiasm, now that they were committed, now that they had said they would help Tito in front of all their hero-worshippers, his eagerness was beginning to ebb.

The next day they joined Master Tito in the village square, where he had parked his ox-cart, a kind of covered wagon like something from a Western, drawn by two lumbering oxen. The four youths took places in the back of the wagon, among sacks and kegs and barrels and carcasses.

‘How long will the journey take?’ Percy asked, sitting up at the front, near Tito’s seat. The taverner goaded the oxen into movement and the cart began to trundle across the square. Mayor Gall and other villagers waved from the steps of the hall.

Tito waved back. ‘The journey takes two days, without interruptions.’

Percy nodded. They were passing down the village street, heading northwards. ‘What kind of interruptions?’

Tito shrugged. 'Trees across the king's highway,' he said. 'Robbers. Monsters.' He looked at Percy and smiled knowingly. 'But I have nothing to fear now heroes accompany me.'

Percy looked sourly into the distance and grunted.

They left the village and the highway led them through the fields before it plunged into the beeches at the head of a valley. All was quiet in the forest, except for distant birdcalls and mysterious rustlings amid the undergrowth, and the rumbling of the wheels and the thump of ox-hoofs on the paved road. The highway began to rise as they headed into the hills, and the trees changed again from beech and ash surrounded by emerald carpets of moss or seas of bracken, back to gloomy pines lining brown carpets of needles.

They halted about noon on a verdant patch of grass beside a silver waterfall that plunged down the craggy hillside into a spreading pool. Tito shared his hamper of provisions with them. They lunched quite well considering the taverner's supposed poverty.

The king's highway, as Tito called it, was a wide, paved road of cracked stones, muddy and rutted in places, but well-built and well kept. 'Why's it called the king's highway?' Percy asked.

Tito looked up at him as he tidied away their picnic. 'It was constructed by a forefather of the current king,' he said, 'and it is still used by his descendants. King Fortinbras II marched this road on his way to put down the rebellion of Duke Dynamoke.'

'When was that?' asked Percy.

'Back in my grandfather's day,' Tito said.

'No king's been here since?' Gerald asked in surprise.

'Indeed. The Mountain Duchies have been blessed,' said Tito enigmatically.

They continued their journey through the wooded hills for the rest of the day and much of the evening. Tito was determined to force the pace, and drove the ox-cart on through the gathering gloom. As it grew colder, the youths bundled themselves up in blankets in the back. Percy lay near the back flap, looking out at the darkening sky outside and the pines covering the hills behind them. As they drove on, the moon rose above the forest. It was almost full.

Near midnight, they parked off the highway, and Tito let the oxen browse while after a frugal supper they all bedded down in the back. Above them, the moon sailed into the seas of the night, its eerie light spilling dimly onto the surface of the king's highway. As Percy slipped away into sleep, he thought he heard a wolf howl.

The next day was much like the first, the road stretching on before them, the trees looming over them on either side, the crags beetling above. They saw no sign of robbers although towards noon of the second day, Brian saw something large and reptilian fly over the nearby hill. Percy only caught a glimpse of it, and he thought Brian was exaggerating.

'It was big,' Brian said. 'Big with wings like a bat. But scales like a snake.'

‘Doubtless a wyvern,’ said Tito. ‘There are said to be some still dwelling among the peaks. Occasionally they carry off sheep from the hill farms to the north of here. Sometimes, if they are angered, or on heat, they will attack human habitations and set them ablaze with their fiery breath. Otherwise they pose little threat.’

Further on, however, they passed several fire-blackened wagons. Percy saw the gleam of yellowing bone among the trees. He looked at Tito.

‘Did these wyverns do that?’ he asked.

Tito shook his head. ‘Robbers, last year. They plague the king’s highway during the trading season.’

‘Fire and theft,’ said Percy. ‘Now I can see why it was such an attractive proposition...’

‘Why doesn’t the king do something about it?’ asked Norman from behind them.

Tito shook his head. ‘The king never comes here,’ he said. ‘He is kept busy in other corners of the kingdom.’

‘You know, if the king looked after his subjects better,’ Gerald observed, ‘you wouldn’t have to rely on sorcerers and demons to keep yourself protected.’

Tito grunted. They drove on.

‘Are we nearly there yet?’ Brian whined.

‘We should reach the Hostelry of the Four Ravens by noon tomorrow,’ Tito predicted.

And his prophecy proved true.

That night they camped beside the road again, and they were up and moving as soon as dawn cast a ruddy glimmer through the dark pines. Half a day’s travel and they found themselves in a valley where the trees receded and heathland flanked the road. Turning a corner, they saw the Hostelry of the Four Ravens nestled beneath a steep, wooded slope.

It was a thatched house with walls of turf. A sign creaked from the main wall, showing four crudely painted ravens. Beside it grew a holly bush. At the back, Percy glimpsed what looked like a small allotment, rows and rows of vegetables. Smoke seeped up from a stone chimney, the only part of the building made of stone. In front of the hostelry were a few benches and tables; the local equivalent of a beer garden, Percy assumed. To one side were various outbuildings—stores, granaries, stables.

Standing in the gloomy main doorway was a tall, thin, elderly figure wearing a hooded cloak. He had long, stiff white moustaches, a long nose and a sycophantic look. His long eyebrows were peaked in perpendicular inquisitiveness.

‘Master taverner,’ the man oozed. ‘You return? It is full moon tonight.’

Tito leapt down from the wagon and unyoked the oxen, preparatory to leading them to their stall. As he passed the thin man, he said:

‘I return with assistance, Harek. You need not remind me of what faces me tonight. But I have with me four heroes, Harek. Heroes. I have seen them in action! They shall aid us in our fight against the dark. The demons.’

Harek shook his long thin head. ‘You were best to pay the price,’ he said. ‘Lowland whores and drabs aplenty would happily yield up their brats for your purposes. Keep up the offerings and you will have nothing to fear. These youths will not prevail against the horrors of hell.’

Tito flung him the traces with a face like thunder. ‘Take the oxen to their stalls, Harek,’ he commanded. ‘I shall take our saviours into the hostelry.’

He beckoned the four youths to follow him and they entered the hostelry.

‘Ignore Harek,’ he said as he led them inside. ‘He’s merely my concierge, who takes care of the hostelry during my absence.’

The room beyond was gloomy and low-roofed. A bar, little more than wooden beams propped on barrels, took up one end. Tables and stools were scattered about the rush-strewn floor. Tapestries and hangings adorned some of the walls. Mounted on the far wall was a largish metal object, a seven-pointed star. Beneath it was a small shelf, on which stood two unlit candles.

Tito went to the bar and checked the spigots of the barrels ranking the wall behind. He leaned on the bar and smiled at them.

‘What can I get you, lads?’ he asked.

Norman said, ‘We’re all too young to drink. Maybe a coke?’

‘Shut up!’ Brian hissed, horrified by such honesty. ‘Pints all round!’ he added determinedly. ‘On me!’

‘It’s a free bar,’ Percy pointed out. ‘I’ll have whatever’s drinkable. What about you, Gerald?’

Gerald was looking at the seven-pointed star on the far wall, troubled. ‘I’d rather have answers,’ he said.

Tito poured tankards of some local brew and handed them out to the youths. ‘What do you wish to know?’

‘Your concierge,’ Gerald said. ‘What did he mean about whores and... brats? Keep up the offerings? What offerings have you been making, master taverner? Brats?’

Tito slumped onto the bar, immediately depressed. He looked glumly up at them. ‘I told everyone in Wishbone Village that I had been offering up roosters,’ he said. ‘I hinted that the offerings grew... worse. I did not wish to say how exactly they had worsened. Not before the villagers. You, I suppose, are involved now. You should know it all.’ He nodded. ‘Yes, my

heroes. In the end, the sorcerer forced me to offer up babies. Human babies.’ He pointed at the shelf that lay beneath the seven-pointed star. ‘There is the altar where I left them on the night of the full moon. And every morning I found that they were gone.’

Norman gasped. Percy’s mouth was dry, his hairs twitched with horror. Gerald shook his head in disgust. Brian goggled up from his pint, with a long white moustache of beer foam that reminded Percy briefly of Harek.

‘Babies?’ Percy asked. Tito nodded glumly. ‘How did you get hold of these ... babies?’

Tito shrugged. ‘I haunted local villages at dead of night. I would creep into the cots of peasants with brats and steal the infants from their cradles. I am not proud of what I did, my heroes! It began innocently enough with the sacrifice of a rooster each full moon. It grew. It worsened. Soon it was babies. It was partly because of this, and because of the mounting dangers, that I refused to continue the offerings.’

‘You stole the villagers’ babies?’ Norman gasped. ‘They said the old man on the mountain was the baby-thief!’

Tito gave a cracked laugh. ‘Yes, he was blamed,’ he said casually. ‘That old fool Sator! He was an innocent yet he took the blame. No one suspected that Tito the master taverner was the culprit.’

The four youths exchanged horrified glances. Tito saw this, and guilt and dismay crossed his face in quick succession.

‘You must help me!’ he cried. ‘You must save me from the forces of hell!’

‘Dunno,’ said Percy slowly. ‘Seems to me like you’re one of the forces of hell yourself.’

Norman was pouting. ‘This is unfair! Sator got the blame for what you did!’

Gerald put his feet up on a table and leaned on his stool against the wall. ‘Okay. How much is this worth to you?’ he asked Tito.

‘I thought you were heroes,’ Tito gasped. ‘I said you had free bed and board. And free drinks! What more do you want?’

‘That was before you told us you were sacrificing babies,’ Gerald said. He looked round at the others. ‘We were willing to do this when we didn’t know the master taverner’s dirty little secret. I think we should still do it. But we want decent payment. We want enough food and gold to keep us going until we reach Photogeneia’s tower. And enough to buy us passage on a caravan going that way.’

Tito’s face was a picture of despair. Percy looked at Gerald. ‘I reckon this is time we started thinking about what we’re doing,’ he said. ‘We’ve agreed to fight demons all for the sake of a guy who sacrifices babies!’

He was revolted. Black roosters were bad enough—he was totally opposed to animal cruelty. But babies?

Gerald came over to him. 'Never mind that,' he hissed in Percy's ear. 'We want to get to this sorceress's tower, don't we? We'll take forever if we have to walk. It's fucking miles, by the sound of things, and we've walked far enough as it is. But this guy—we've got a hold over him!'

Brian looked up from his third pint. He'd paid no heed to the unfolding drama. 'Where are these demons?' he demanded. 'They'll soon fall to my blade, that right, Tito? If they take physical form.'

The taverner wagged his head solemnly. 'That is so,' he said. 'They will fall to your sword, and that of your heroic companions!' Before anyone could speak, Harek's long thin shape appeared in the doorway. The garish rays of the sun transformed him into a ghastly silhouette.

'The oxen are in their stalls,' the concierge told Tito. He had removed his hood, and Percy could see that he was as bald as an egg. 'What other duties have you for me, master taverner? The sun is close to setting...'

Tito's face paled. He stammered. 'Nothing further, except to prepare our supper,' he told the concierge. 'Then go to your quarters and lock yourself in until the morning.'

The concierge gave the youths a dark look, and withdrew.

Percy wasn't sure he'd be able to stomach a supper. When it came, it was bean broth of some kind, with hunks of black bread washed down by more tankards of beer. He'd been expecting something a bit better than this, but Tito explained that they had scoffed the best of his fare on the way here, and he had little money to purchase more. The expenses of his journey to Wishbone Village, during which he had purchased essential supplies as well as looking for heroes, had left him almost destitute.

'So now we wait,' said Percy, once they had finished the meal. The common room was still lit, but the light came from two glowing gems embedded in the ceiling. He went to the door. Outside, it was pitch dark, except for the silver glow of the rising moon. It was cold, too. He shivered, and returned to the bar.

Tito rose and went outside to pull shutters down over the windows. He returned, and locked and bolted the main door. The youths had helped themselves to more pints.

'I hope you don't mean to drink yourselves insensible,' he said reprovingly.

Gerald grinned coldly over his tankard. 'Ever heard of Dutch courage?' he asked. 'I suppose not. You've never even heard of Holland, have you?'

'I think I know what you mean,' Tito replied. 'But I thought you were heroes!'

'Even heroes appreciate a stiff drink now and then,' said Percy, then dropped his tankard with a clatter. Beer spilt all over the flagstones, drenching Gerald's legs.

'Idiot,' Gerald began, then halted, staring at Percy. 'What is it?' he added.

Percy lifted a hand for quiet. Silence fell on the bar. He listened intently. It came again.

A padding noise from outside the door.

Brian's eyes were wide. Slowly, gradually, he began to draw his sword.

'There's something out there,' Norman moaned in fear.

Tito clutched at his temples, his face white. 'It's them!' he hissed urgently. 'It's the emissaries of Zorn!'

'Is it now?' said Gerald determinedly. He rose and strode to the door. Percy felt an urgent need to empty his bladder just like he had emptied his tankard. Tito wailed as Gerald slid back the bolts. What was the idiot doing? They didn't want to make things easy for the demons.

Gerald flung back the door and reached out into the night. He dragged a cloaked, hooded figure into the common room. It held a lantern in one hand. Percy recognised it as Harek.

'What were you doing out there?' Gerald demanded.

'With a lantern...' said Tito slowly.

'It's dark, master taverner,' said Harek in a dignified voice, straightening himself up. 'I'm not walking around in the darkness.'

'Why were you walking around?' Tito asked. 'Don't you know what night this is? I told you to go to your quarters.'

'I was checking up on...' Harek broke off, sniffing.

Percy copied him. He could smell smoke coming from somewhere. He looked towards the still open door and saw a red glow creeping around the doorjamb.

Tito rushed to the door. 'The granary is ablaze!'

Percy joined him and the others crowded round the door behind him. The yard outside was lit by the ruddy light of the blazing granary, one of the outbuildings near the stables.

'Help me!' Tito shouted. He thrust a large bucket into Percy's hands and led them all to a large barrel of rainwater. Then they formed a chain and began to fling bucketsful of water onto the roaring flames that even now licked at the stables nearby.

It was close to midnight before the flames were fully extinguished. Percy wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand and looked at the blackened timbers that stood stark against the moonlit sky. He turned to the others, dusting off his hands.

‘Well, looks like that’s sorted...’ He broke off, pointing. ‘What’s that?’

They turned at his shout to see a terrifying figure loping away from the main tavern across the vegetable patch at the back. It was about twelve foot high, black as pitch except for a hideous animal skull in place of a head.

Then it was gone, vanished into the trees.

‘What was it?’ Norman asked.

Tito shook his head. ‘Zorn’s emissaries are massing,’ he murmured. ‘Back into the tavern.’

They hurried back into the comforting light of the common room and Tito shut and bolted the doors. As he did so, Percy and the others were staring round the room in horror.

The barrels had been smashed; ale and wine pooled on the floor. The tankards were gone. The walls had been stripped of their hangings. One of the glowing gems had been prised out. Only the seven-pointed star remained on the far wall but someone had lit the candles, and they flickered fitfully and sent their own shadows dancing crazily.

‘What’s happened in here?’ Tito asked, turning to see the devastation.

‘It must have been that thing,’ said Gerald. ‘That thing we saw vanishing into the trees.’

‘Okay. No one goes outside now,’ said Percy. ‘It’s way too dangerous.’

After a pause, Tito said, ‘Where’s Harek?’

They all exchanged glances. ‘He must have stayed outside,’ Percy breathed.

‘Who saw him last?’ asked Gerald. After a hurried discussion, they realised that no one had seen him since the fire broke out.

‘Fire,’ said Percy musingly. ‘And theft.’ He indicated the scene before them. Tito looked horrified.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Gerald.

‘Zorn’s emissaries!’ Tito wailed. ‘They have come to punish me! With fire and theft!’

‘We should go after that thing!’ Brian shouted. ‘Kill it!’

‘What about Harek?’ Norman asked quietly.

‘We should look for him first,’ said Tito. ‘He’ll be in danger if Zorn’s emissaries are in the forest.’

‘Go outside?’ Percy said. ‘Don’t be stupid.’

‘I thought I hired heroes,’ Tito sneered. ‘You weren’t afraid of those golems. Are you afraid of demons?’

‘Actually,’ Percy said blandly, ‘I was shit-scared of the golems. As for demons...’ He shivered.

‘I’m not afraid,’ Brian boasted.

‘You should be, you tit,’ Gerald snapped.

‘I’m scared,’ Norman confessed.

‘I thought you would be,’ Gerald told him. ‘Coward.’

Tito was sweating. ‘I told you,’ he stammered, ‘if the demon manifests itself, any good swordsman can match it. That’s why I hired you.’

They all looked up, startled, at a banging sound from up above. It sounded as if something was walking across the roof. Percy saw dust descend from the plaster ceiling. Something was moving up there.

‘It sounds like it’s manifested itself alright,’ Percy said. An eerie wailing moan broke out from above.

‘Shit!’ Gerald blurted out. Norman was staring fixedly at the ceiling above him. But Brian was undeterred. He went to the door with his sword drawn, and began unbolting it with one hand.

‘What are you doing?’ Percy demanded. ‘No one goes out!’

Brian cast a contemptuous look over his shoulder.

‘I am Brian the Destroyer!’ he cried as he pulled back the bolt and flung open the door. ‘I’ll soon sort it out!’ He stalked out into the night.

‘He’s mad,’ Gerald said, as if in sudden realisation. ‘He really has convinced himself that he’s some kind of invincible barbarian.’

Percy shook his head frantically. ‘Doesn’t that idiot know we’re dealing with something a bit worse than orcs here?’

‘Don’t you think we should go after him?’ Norman asked tremulously.

‘Do you want to go after him?’ Gerald asked. ‘Or do you want to stay here cacking your pants?’

Tears pricked in Norman’s eyes. He shook his head. ‘No. I don’t really want to go after him. But I think we should, even if we’re scared.’

‘How courageous,’ said Percy bitterly. ‘If he’s crazy enough to go out there and fight that thing—whatever it is—then that’s his problem.’

‘Quiet!’ said Tito suddenly. Percy looked at him, affronted. The taverner was holding a hand up. ‘Listen,’ he added.

Percy listened. ‘I can’t hear anything.’

‘Neither can I,’ said Norman.

Gerald burst into hysterical laughter.

‘Stop that!’ Percy snapped. Gerald subsided.

‘You’re right,’ said Tito. ‘It’s silent outside. No sound of fighting...’

‘No sound of Brian being torn limb from limb, either,’ Gerald added.

Percy turned to face them. They looked back at him, their own faces pale. ‘What’s happened to him?’ Percy shouted. Silence was his only answer.

He went to the door and stared out into the night. On the far side of the yard stood a dark figure, watching the tavern: a tall man in robes, with a pointed hat. Seeing Percy appear, he turned and fled into the trees. Forgetting his previous resolution, Percy pursued.

The forest swallowed them up.

CONCLUDES NEXT WEEK

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THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO by Gregory KH Bryant

Episode Eighteen

The battle in the skies of Callisto devolved into countless skirmishes and dogfights that girdled the moon. Lieutenant Hardy and his fighters were all now engaged in individual fights, and no overall coordination was possible between them.

They could all just fly, shoot, kill or die.

Hardy tried to stay close to Callisto Base 1, though he was often pulled many hundreds of miles away in tight battles lasting but a half minute at a time. Fighter ships crashed down on the icy plains of Callisto, sending up huge plumes of roiling smoke that quickly dissipated in the Callistoan sky.

Several times over the course of the long-running battle, Hardy or one of his fighters were able to lead ships from the Scroungers' fleet into the field of mines Colonel Westland had deployed from the "Bellerophon". Always with the same results. Pilots and gunners clutched their chests, as their hearts burst from the pulses of the mines.

Some were able to maintain control and continue fighting for even as long as a half hour or more after plowing blindly into the field of pulse mines. But eventually, whether it was in only moments, or in long, tortured hours, they must succumb. Their ships, unguided, tumbled out of the black sky. With their cannons, Hardy's fighters were able to render the dead ships into cascades of shimmering metal that only rained down harmlessly upon the domed colony, Callisto Base 1.

Colonel Westland kept the "Bellerophon" in a low orbit around Callisto, striving to draw the fire of Turhan Mot's many fighter ships away from the bases. Moving at nearly interplanetary speeds, the half-mile long "Bellerophon" was surrounded by fighter ships, all engaged in their own individual combats, both attacking, and defending, the "Bellerophon".

Jeffrey and Emily ran toward the rapidly descending wall. Once down, it would cut them off from the other pods of Callisto Base 1, isolating the damaged pod they were fleeing from all others. Jeffrey moved quickly, and was dragging Emily by the wrist. She, however, could not match Jeffrey's speed.

The walls were already halfway down. Sirens and warning lights blared.

Jeffrey picked Emily up in his arms and carried her, half running and half stumbling toward the nearest of the rapidly descending emergency walls.

No. It wasn't going to work.

Emily by herself was not fast enough to make it. Jeffrey, weighed down by Emily, would not make it. He'd get close. That he saw, though his chest was clutching, gasping for air as he ran, his feet pounding the pavement of the walkway.

But he was going to miss it by inches. He'd get just close enough to slam his face against the wall as it came down.

The sirens grew ever louder as he came close to the door, but he could hear the 'hiss' of air escaping through the cracked dome over his head even through the shrill 'Whoop! Whoop! Whoop!'

Still twelve feet separated Jeffrey and Emily from the descending wall. Were he there, he'd have to drop to his knees and crawl under it.

He was not going to make it.

So, like a football player throwing himself into a tackle, Jeffrey flung himself into one last leap that brought him within feet of the wall.

And he thrust Emily through it, pushing her to the opposite side.

He only managed to pull his arm out of the way an instant before the door would have crushed it. As it was, he got the tips of his fingers very bluntly and brutally punched. He glanced at them. His flattened fingernails were already turning purple.

When the wall came down and locked itself into place, the siren ended.

Silence enveloped the pods.

Emily leaped up and turned to look for her brother. She saw only the wall and empty walkways.

The wall was equipped with windows and emergency hatches, but no airlocks.

Emily ran to one of the windows and peered through it for a glimpse of her brother. Jeffrey, catching her movement through the window from the corner of his eye, came up and put his face to the glass.

"Jeffrey!" Emily shouted, while pounding on the glass. No sound came through.

Jeffrey pushed a button below the window, activating an intercom.

"You should go, Emily. Go find mom and dad."

"No! I'm staying here! You should have come through, too."

"I would've made it," Jeffrey said. He held up his fingers to show Emily where the tips had been pinched. They were purple and swollen.

Emily's face flinched when she saw his fingers.

"But still..." she began, her voice trailing off to silence. There was nothing to argue. Jeffrey was right.

“But I’m staying right here, anyway,” she insisted.

“Maybe you better go,” Jeffrey said, with a glance toward the crack in the dome.

With the silence of the sirens, the hissing of the air escaping through the crack grew even louder. The crack itself had grown.

“Uh...” Jeffrey said.

“What?” Emily demanded. “What?”

“Maybe I can find an emergency exit. Or something.”

“Do it then! Hurry!”

Emily grew more frantic as the instants passed.

A rending sound caught Jeffrey’s ear. He glanced upward. The crack had grown twice its former size. Now it spread, like a series of webs, across the transparent dome, a full twelve feet in length.

It wouldn’t be long before it blew, Jeffrey knew. Maybe minutes. Maybe seconds.

Illara had six... count them, six goddamn fighter ships on her ass. Six of them, crowding her since she flew past Europa. Her ship, ‘Izzy’ was much more maneuverable, and Illara did manage to elude the many barrages the ships constantly fired at her. But that came at a huge cost to her ship, its speed and its fuel.

Flying in ceaseless rolling corkscrewing spirals, she lost a lot of time, and burned up a lot of fuel, on her return flight to Callisto. Now she was coming up on the moon, she saw the battle surrounding it, countless ships buzzing it, like wasps about a hive. There was the “Bellerophon” speeding close to the surface of the moon, firing its cannons while dogfights beyond counting swarmed all around it.

There was another ship, almost the length of the “Bellerophon” coming up fast behind it. She did not know the ship, but guessed, rightly, that it was Turhan Mot’s ‘Grand Marquis’. A third large ship, Yamir’s ‘Reliant’ was coming up on the ‘Bellerophon’ from the ‘Bellerophon’s’ port side.

The ‘Bellerophon’, Illara saw, would soon be squeezed between the two other ships.

But Illara had her own nuisances demanding her attention.

Now she was within range of the battle over Callisto, Illara abruptly brought ‘Izzy’ about to deal with the ships pursuing her.

These were not the fighters of Turhan Mot's fleet, but larger, interplanetary ships of independent rovers among the Scroungers who had joined up for this adventure. These were slower ships, generally, than Illara's 'Izzy', but her need to constantly elude the cannons of her pursuers kept her always within their range.

Each ship was large enough to carry a crew of as many as a dozen, or even two dozen people. Each ship was also heavily armed. But none of them were as maneuverable as 'Izzy', and in this was Illara's best advantage.

"Hey, check this out, guys. Got some surprises for ya," Illara said to herself.

Looping upward and backward, she set 'Izzy' on a course that brought her plunging into the crowd of her pursuers. As they fired at her, many of their shots went wild, and into their companion ships.

The ships scattered and before they could regroup, Illara set 'Izzy' on a course directly at the largest of the ships stalking her. The pilot of the ship, seeing her, attempted to avoid her. He first brought the nose of his ship to the port. Illara edged 'Izzy's' nose to her starboard, keeping her ship in a direct line at the Scroungers' ship.

The pilot of that ship dropped its nose. Illara followed. The space between them grew smaller and smaller with every instant. Illara was firing her forward cannons without stop, keeping them aimed, as much as she could, at a single spot at the bridge of the ship.

The pilot brought his ship about, in an attempt to retreat.

Exposing the belly of his ship, which Illara hit hard with her plasma cannons. A highly charged cloud of ionized particles swallowed up the ship, instantly electrocuting all living things within.

Illara hit the dead hulk with a pulse that sent it rolling through the Callistoan sky, nearly striking one of her pursuers.

Now there were five ships after Illara.

They converged upon her from above, below, behind, port and starboard.

She had no way to go, but forward.

She punched it, as ruby beams from laser cannons, and plasma pulses raged all about her.

Yamir was disgusted. Turhan Mot had made not a single move toward the "Bellerophon", and Yamir would be damned before he attempted to tackle that ship alone, with the 'Reliant'. Yamir did not know that it was Carter Ward and Mud who had screwed Turhan Mot's plans, that with Dimara's assistance at the guns, Ward had destroyed Turhan Mot's flight deck, and—again with Dimara's assistance—coming ever closer to destroying the 'Grand Marquis' itself.

All Yamir knew was that Turhan Mot was idiotically holding back at the most critical moment of their concerted attack against Callisto and the 'Bellerophon'. Why? What the hell was Turhan Mot's damn problem?

"Where the hell are you?" Yamir demanded through the ships' intercoms. He had no patience for protocol at the moment, and spoke directly, himself.

"Our commander, the grand Turhan Mot, begs to inform him, Yamir, of the 'Reliant', that..."

"Fuck that, and fuck you!" Yamir shouted. "I will speak only to Turhan Mot!"

A moment of confused noises came through the intercom.

Then Turhan Mot's voice came through.

"We are always pleased to speak with our brother, but..." Turhan Mot began.

"Where the hell are you!" Yamir demanded.

"We have been confronted with an unplanned for development... we..."

"Are you coming, or not?" Yamir shouted. "Right now I'm looking at treachery. Treachery. You hear me? Treachery! Has Turhan Mot led us here, only to abandon us to destruction?"

"Oh, my brother," Turhan Mot began. Yamir cut him off.

If I don't see the 'Grand Marquis' coming about and joining us against this ship, the 'Bellerophon', on the instant, I will take all my forces out of this farce and leave this all to you."

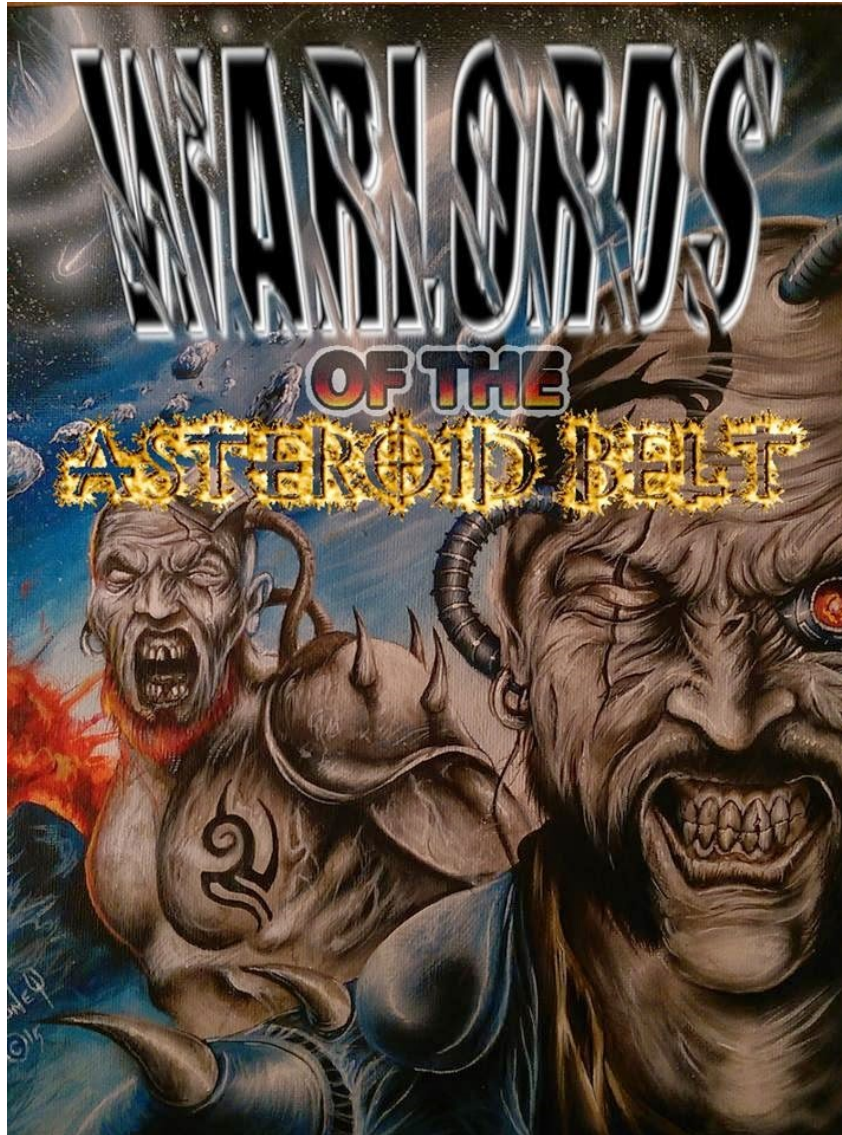
"Believe me, my brother," Turhan Mot said. "We harbor no such treachery in our heart against you. We have been attacked, and have been burdened with fighting this attacker. But we shall bring our ship about, on the instant, and join you now in our campaign against the 'Bellerophon'.

Turhan Mot turned to Tu Hit.

"Take us to the 'Bellerophon', he commanded. "We shall join our brother Yamir in destroying it."

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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



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TALES OF THE DEAD by Johann August Apel

The Storm

— “Of shapes that walk
At dead of night, and clank their chains, and wave
The torch of hell around the murderer’s bed.”
PLEASURES OF IMAGINATION.

On the evening of the 12th of June 17—, a joyous party was assembled at Monsieur de Montbrun’s château to celebrate the marriage of his nephew, who had, in the morn of that day, led to the altar the long-sought object of his fond attachment. The mansion, which was on this occasion the scene of merriment, was situated in the province of Gascony, at no very great distance from the town of —.

It was a venerable building, erected during the war of the League, and consequently discovered in its exterior some traces of that species of architecture which endeavoured to unite strength and massiveness with domestic comfort. Situated in a romantic, but thinly peopled district, the family of Monsieur de Montbrun was compelled principally to rely on itself for amusement and society. This family consisted of the chevalier, an old soldier of blunt but hospitable manners; his nephew the bridegroom, whom (having no male children) he had adopted as his son, and Mademoiselle Emily, his only daughter: the latter was amiable, frank, and generous; warm in her attachments, but rather romantic in forming them. Employed in rural sports and occupations, and particularly attached to botany, for which the country around afforded an inexhaustible field, the chevalier and his inmates had not much cultivated the intimacy of the few families which disgust to the world or other motives had planted in this retired spot. Occasional visits exchanged with the nearest of their neighbours sometimes enlivened their small circle; with the greater part of those who lived at a distance, they were scarcely acquainted even by name.

The approaching nuptials, however, of Theodore (which was the name of Monsieur de Montbrun’s adopted son) excited considerable conversation in the adjacent district: and the wedding of her cousin, it was determined by Emily, should not pass off unaccompanied by every festivity which the nature of their situation and the joyfulness of the event would allow. On this occasion, therefore, inquiries were made as to all the neighbouring gentry within a considerable distance around; and there were none of the least note neglected in the invitations, which were scattered in all directions. Many persons were consequently present, with whose persons and character the host and his family were unacquainted: some also accepted the summons, who were strangers to them even in name.

Emily was attentive and courteous to all; but to one lady in particular she attached herself during the entertainment with most sedulous regard. Madame de Nunez, the immediate object of Emily’s care, had lately settled in the neighbourhood, and had hitherto studied to shun society. It was supposed that she was the widow of a Spanish officer of the Walloon guards, to whom she had been fondly attached; indeed so much so, that, notwithstanding he had been dead several years, the lady never appeared but in the garb of mourning. She had only lately settled in Gascony; but her motives for retiring from Spain and fixing on the French side of the Pyrenees were not known, and but slightly conjectured. Isabella de Nunez was about twenty-eight years of age, tall and well-formed: her countenance was striking, nay even handsome; but a nice physiognomist would have traced in her features evidence of the

stronger passions of human nature. He would have seen pride softened by distress; and would have fancied, at times, that the effects of some concealed crime were still evident in her knit brow and retiring eye, when she became the object of marked scrutiny.

She had never before entered the château de Montbrun, and her person had hitherto been unnoticed by Emily; but who, having now seen her, devoted herself with ardour to her new friend. The lady received the attentions of her amiable hostess with grateful but dignified reserve.

The morning had been extremely sultry, and an oppressive sensation in the air, which disordered respiration, threw, as the day closed, an air of gloom over the company, ill suited to the occasion of their meeting. Madame de Nunez appeared more than any one else to feel the effects of the lurid atmosphere; the occasional sparks of gaiety which she had discovered, gradually disappeared; and before the day had entirely shut in, she seemed at times perfectly abstracted, at other times to start with causeless apprehension. In order to divert or dispel this increasing uneasiness, which threatened to destroy all the pleasure of the festival, dancing was proposed; and the enlivening sounds of the music in a short time dissipated the temporary gloom. The dancing had not however long continued, ere the expected storm burst in all its fury on the château: the thunder, with its continued roar, reverberated by the adjoining mountains, caused the utmost alarm in the bosom of the fair visitors; the torrents of rain which fell, might almost be said to swell the waters of the neighbouring Garonne, whilst sheets of lightning, reflected on its broad waves, gave a deeper horror to the pitchy darkness which succeeded. The continuance of the storm gradually wound up the apprehensions of the greater part of the females to horror; and they took refuge in the arched vaults, and long subterranean passages which branched beneath the château, from the vivid glare of the lightning; although unable to shut their ears to the reiterated claps of thunder which threatened to shake the building to its foundations. In this general scene of horror, Isabella alone appeared unappalled. The alternate abstraction and alarm, which before seemed to harass her mind, had now vanished, and had given place to a character of resignation which might almost be considered as bordering on apathy. While the younger females yielded without resistance to the increasing horrors of the tempest, and by frequent shrieks and exclamations of dread bore testimony to the terror excited in their bosoms by the aggravated circumstances of the scene, she suffered no symptom of apprehension to be visible in her now unvarying features. Agitation had yielded to quiet: she sat ostensibly placid; but her apparent inattention was evidently not the effect of tranquillity, but the result of persevering exertion.

The hour was approaching towards midnight; and the storm, instead of blowing over, having increased in violence, the hospitable owner of the mansion proposed to his guests, that they should abandon the idea of returning home through the torrents of rain, which had already deluged the country, and rendered the roads in the vicinity impassable; but should accommodate themselves, with as little difficulty as possible, to the only plan now to be devised,—of making themselves easy during the remainder of this dismal night. Although his mansion was not extensive, yet he proposed (with the aid of temporary couches, and putting the ladies to the inconvenience of sleeping two in each room) to render the party as comfortable as his means would allow; and which would, at all events, be more agreeable than braving abroad the horrors of the tempest.

Reasonable as such a plan was in itself, it was still more strongly recommended by the circumstance, that the carriages which were expected to convey the parties to their respective

abodes had not arrived; and from the state of the roads, and the continuance of the still pitiless storm, it seemed visionary to expect them.

The party, therefore, yielded without regret to the offered arrangement, save with one dissenting voice. The fair Spaniard alone positively declined the offered accommodation. Argument in vain was used for a considerable space of time to detain her; she positively insisted on returning home: and would alone in the dark have faced the storm, had not an obstacle which appeared invincible, militated against her resolve; this was too imperious to be resisted—her carriage and servants were not arrived; and from the representation of Monsieur de Montbrun's domestics (some of whom had been detached to examine the condition of the neighbouring roads), it was perfectly clear, that with that part of the district in which she resided, no communication could for several hours take place. Madame de Nunez, therefore, at length yielded to necessity; although the pertinacity of her resistance had already excited much surprise, and called forth innumerable conjectures.

The arrangements between the respective parties were soon made, and the greater part of the ladies gladly retired to seek repose from the harassing events of the day. Emily, who had not relaxed in her marked attention to her interesting friend, warmly pressed her to share her own room, in which a sofa had been prepared as a couch, and to which she herself insisted on retiring, while madame de Nunez should take possession of the bed. The latter, however, again strenuously objected to this plan, asserting, that she should prefer remaining all night in one of the sitting-rooms, with no other companion than a book. She appeared obstinately to adhere to this resolution, until Emily politely, yet positively, declared, that were such the intention of her new friend, she would also join her in the saloon, and pass the time in conversation until the day should break, or until Madame's servants should arrive. This proposition, or rather determination, was received by the frowning Isabella with an air of visible chagrin and disappointment, not altogether polite. She expressed her unwillingness that Mademoiselle should be inconvenienced, with some peevishness; but which, however, soon gave place to her former air of good-breeding.

She now appeared anxious to hurry to her room; and the rest of the party having some time retired, she was escorted thither by the ever-attentive Emily. No sooner had they reached the chamber, than Isabella sunk into a chair; and after struggling for some time in evident emotion for utterance, at length exclaimed:—

“Why, dearest Emily, would you insist on sharing with me the horrors of this night? To me the punishment is a merited one: but to you—“

“What, my dearest madame, do you say?” replied Emily affectionately—“The terrors of the night are over, the thunder appears retiring, and the lightning is less vivid; and see in the west (added she, as she went to the window) there are still some remains of the summer twilight. Do not any longer, then, suffer the apprehension of the storm which has passed over us, to disturb the repose which you will, I hope, so shortly enjoy.”

“Talk you of repose!” said Madame de Nunez, in a voice almost choked with agitation—“Know you not, then, that on the anniversary of this horrid night?—but what am I saying!—to you, at present, all this is mystery; too soon your own feelings will add conviction to the terrible experience which six revolving years have afforded me, and which, even now but to think on, harrows up my soul.—But no more —.”

Then darting suddenly towards the door, which had hitherto remained ajar, she closed it with violence; and locking it, withdrew the key, which she placed in her own pocket.—Emily had scarcely time to express her surprise at this action and the apparent distraction which accompanied it, ere Madame de Nunez seized both her hands with more than female strength, and with a maddened voice and eye straining on vacancy, exclaimed: —

“Bear witness, ye powers of terror! that I imposed not this dreadful scene on the female whose oath must now secure her silence.”

Then staring wildly on Mademoiselle de Montbrun, she continued: —

“Why, foolish girl, wouldst thou insist on my partaking thy bed? the viper might have coiled in thy bosom; the midnight assassin might have aimed his dagger at thy breast—but the poison of the one would have been less fatal, and the apprehension of instant annihilation from the other would have been less oppressive, than the harrowing scene which thou art doomed this night to witness—Doomed, I say; for all the powers of hell, whose orgies you must behold, cannot release you from the spectacle which you have voluntarily sought.

“To what am I doomed!” cried Emily, whose fears for herself were lessened in the dread she felt for her friend’s intellects, which she supposed were suddenly become affected by illness, or from the incidents of the past day.

Isabella, after a silence of several minutes, during which she endeavoured to recover some degree of composure, in a softened but determined voice, said: —

“Think not, my friend, (if I may use that endearing expression to one whose early prospects and happier days I am unwillingly condemned to blast,) that disorder has produced the agitation which, spite of myself, you have witnessed.—Alas! great as have been my sorrows, and heavy as my crime weighs on me, my reason has still preserved its throne: to seek oblivion in idiotcy; to bury the remembrance of my fatal error in temporary derangement; would, I might almost say, be happiness to me. But fate has forbidden such an alleviation, and my impending destiny is not to be guarded against by precaution, cannot be avoided by repentance.”

“Nay,” said Emily, “exaggerated as your self-condemnation makes the fault to which you allude appear, in religion you may find a solace which could efface crimes of much deeper dye than any with which you can possibly charge yourself.”

“Ah! no,” replied the fair Spaniard.—“Religion, it is true, holds out her benignant hand to receive the wandering sinner;—she offers to the stranger a home; she welcomes to her bosom the repentant though blood-stained criminal;—but for crimes like mine, what penitence can atone?—But we waste time,” added she; “the midnight hour approaches; and ere the clock in the turret first announces that dreaded period, much must be done.”

Thus saying, she went into the adjoining oratory, and finding on the little altar at which Emily offered her daily oraisons, an ivory crucifix, she returned with it in her hand; and again seizing and forcibly grasping the hand of her now really alarmed hostess, she exclaimed in a hollow, yet determined voice: —

“Swear, that whatsoever you may this night, this eventful night, be a witness to, not all the apprehensions of hell, not all your hopes of heaven, shall tempt you to reveal, until I am committed to the silent tomb—Swear!”

Emily for a moment hesitated to adopt an oath imposed under circumstances of such an extraordinary nature: but whilst she was debating, Madame de Nunez, more violently grasping her hand, exclaimed, in a voice harsh from agitation: —

“Swear; or dread the event!”

“Swear!” Emily fancied she heard echoed from the oratory. Almost sinking with horror, she faintly repeated the solemn oath, which the frantic female, whose character appeared so perfectly changed, thus dictated to her.

She had no sooner thus solemnly bound herself to silence, than Madame de Nunez’s agitation appeared to subside; she replaced the crucifix on the altar, and sinking on her knees before the chair in which Emily, almost void of animation, was seated, she feebly exclaimed: —

“Pardon, dearest Emily, the madness of my conduct; necessity has dictated it towards you; and your wayward fate, and not your suffering friend, is answerable for it. For six long years have I confined to my own bosom the horrors which we this night must jointly witness. On the anniversary of this day—But I dare not yet communicate the dreadful event; some hours hence I may recover composure to relate it: but remember your oath. While I live, the secret is buried in your bosom. You must have remarked my unwillingness to remain in your dwelling; you could not have been inattentive to my repugnance to share your room—too soon you will have a dreadful explanation of the cause. Be not angry with me—I must endeavour to conceal the circumstances which appal my soul: I must still preserve the respect of society, although I have for ever forfeited my own—hence the oath I have imposed on you. But —”

Here further conversation was interrupted by the sound of the turret clock, which began to strike the hour of midnight. It had scarcely finished, ere the slow rolling of a carriage was heard in the paved court-yard; at the noise of which, Madame de Nunez started from the posture in which she had continued at the feet of Emily, and rushed towards the door, which she had previously locked. Emily now heard heavy footsteps ascending the oaken stair-case; and before she could recall her recollection, which so singular a circumstance had bewildered, the door of the room in which they were sitting, spite of its fastening, slowly moved on its hinges; and in the next minute—Emily sunk on the earth in a state of stupefaction.

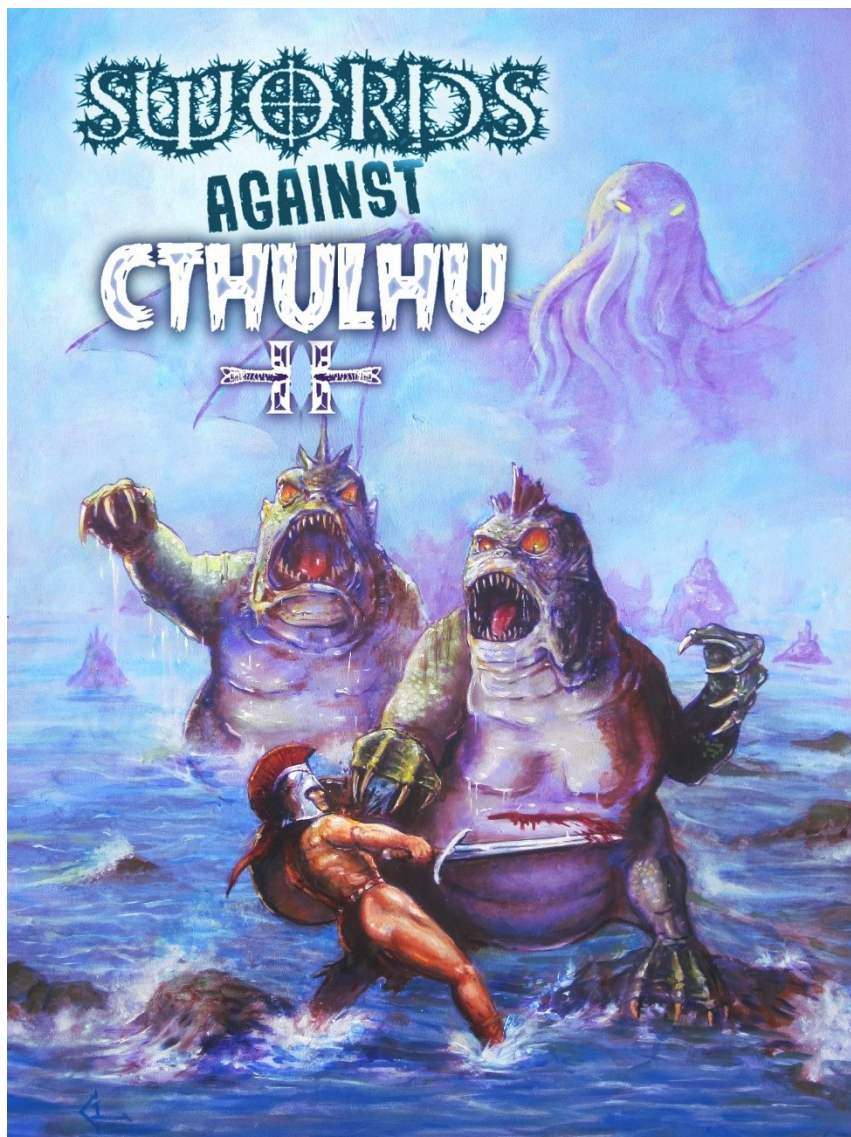
It is well for the human frame, that when assailed by circumstances too powerful to support, it seeks shelter in oblivion. The mind recoils from the horrors which it cannot meet, and is driven into insensibility.

At an early hour of the ensuing morning Madame de Nunez quitted Monsieur de Montbrun’s château, accompanied by her servants, whom the retiring torrents had permitted to await their mistress’s commands. She took a hasty farewell of the master of the mansion, and without making any inquiries as to the rest of the party, departed.

At the usual hour of breakfast, Emily did not appear; and her father at length went to her room door, and receiving no answer to his inquiries, went in. Judge his horror, when he discovered his daughter lying on the bed in the clothes she had worn the preceding day, but in a state of apparent insensibility. Immediate medical assistance was procured, and she at length discovered symptoms of returning life; but no sooner had she recovered her recollection, than, looking, with horror and affright around her, she again relapsed into a state of inanimation. Repeated cordials being administered, she was again restored to life; but only to become the victim of a brain-fever, which in a few days put a period to her existence. In a short interval of recollection, in the early part of her illness, she confided what we have here related to her father; but conscientiously kept from his knowledge what she was bound by her oath to conceal. The very remembrance of what she had witnessed on that fatal night, hurried her into delirium, and she fell a victim to the force of recollection.

Madame de Nunez did not long survive her; but expired under circumstances of unexampled horror.

THE END



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THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND by Jules Verne

Part 3. The Secret of the Island

Chapter 4

“She has blown up!” cried Herbert.

“Yes! blown up, just as if Ayrton had set fire to the powder!” returned Pencroft, throwing himself into the lift together with Neb and the lad.

“But what has happened?” asked Gideon Spilett, quite stunned by this unexpected catastrophe.

“Oh! this time, we shall know—” answered the engineer quickly.

“What shall we know?—”

“Later! later! Come, Spilett. The main point is that these pirates have been exterminated!”

And Cyrus Harding, hurrying away the reporter and Ayrton, joined Pencroft, Neb, and Herbert on the beach.

Nothing could be seen of the brig, not even her masts. After having been raised by the water-spout, she had fallen on her side, and had sunk in that position, doubtless in consequence of some enormous leak. But as in that place the channel was not more than twenty feet in depth, it was certain that the sides of the submerged brig would reappear at low water.

A few things from the wreck floated on the surface of the water, a raft could be seen consisting of spare spars, coops of poultry with their occupants still living, boxes and barrels, which gradually came to the surface, after having escaped through the hatchways, but no pieces of the wreck appeared, neither planks from the deck, nor timber from the hull,—which rendered the sudden disappearance of the “Speedy” perfectly inexplicable.

However, the two masts, which had been broken and escaped from the shrouds and stays came up, and with their sails, some furled and the others spread. But it was not necessary to wait for the tide to bring up these riches, and Ayrton and Pencroft jumped into the boat with the intention of towing the pieces of wreck either to the beach or to the islet. But just as they were shoving off, an observation from Gideon Spilett arrested them.

“What about those six convicts who disembarked on the right bank of the Mercy?” said he.

In fact, it would not do to forget that the six men whose boat had gone to pieces on the rocks had landed at Flotsam Point.

They looked in that direction. None of the fugitives were visible. It was probable that, having seen their vessel engulfed in the channel, they had fled into the interior of the island.

“We will deal with them later,” said Harding. “As they are armed, they will still be dangerous; but as it is six against six, the chances are equal. To the most pressing business first.”

Ayrton and Pencroft pulled vigorously towards the wreck.

The sea was calm and the tide very high, as there had been a new moon but two days before. A whole hour at least would elapse before the hull of the brig could emerge from the water of the channel.

Ayrton and Pencroft were able to fasten the masts and spars by means of ropes, the ends of which were carried to the beach. There, by the united efforts of the settlers the pieces of wreck were hauled up. Then the boat picked up all that was floating, coops, barrels, and boxes, which were immediately carried to the Chimneys.

Several bodies floated also. Among them, Ayrton recognized that of Bob Harvey, which he pointed out to his companion, saying with some emotion,—

“That is what I have been, Pencroft.”

“But what you are no longer, brave Ayrton!” returned the sailor warmly.

It was singular enough that so few bodies floated. Only five or six were counted, which were already being carried by the current towards the open sea. Very probably the convicts had not had time to escape, and the ship lying over on her side, the greater number of them had remained below. Now the current, by carrying the bodies of these miserable men out to sea, would spare the colonists the sad task of burying them in some corner of their island.

For two hours, Cyrus Harding and his companions were solely occupied in hauling up the spars on to the sand, and then in spreading the sails which were perfectly uninjured, to dry. They spoke little, for they were absorbed in their work, but what thoughts occupied their minds!

The possession of this brig, or rather all that she contained, was a perfect mine of wealth. In fact, a ship is like a little world in miniature, and the stores of the colony would be increased by a large number of useful articles. It would be, on a large scale, equivalent to the chest found at Flotsam Point.

“And besides,” thought Pencroft, “why should it be impossible to refloat the brig? If she has only a leak, that may be stopped up; a vessel from three to four hundred tons, why she is a regular ship compared to our ‘Bonadventure’! And we could go a long distance in her! We could go anywhere we liked! Captain Harding, Ayrton and I must examine her! She would be well worth the trouble!”

In fact, if the brig was still fit to navigate, the colonists’ chances of returning to their native land were singularly increased. But, to decide this important question, it was necessary to wait until the tide was quite low, so that every part of the brig’s hull might be examined.

When their treasures had been safely conveyed on shore, Harding and his companions agreed to devote some minutes to breakfast. They were almost famished; fortunately, the larder was

not far off, and Neb was noted for being an expeditious cook. They breakfasted, therefore, near the Chimneys, and during their repast, as may be supposed, nothing was talked of but the event which had so miraculously saved the colony.

“Miraculous is the word,” repeated Pencroft, “for it must be acknowledged that those rascals blew up just at the right moment! Granite House was beginning to be uncomfortable as a habitation!”

“And can you guess, Pencroft,” asked the reporter, “how it happened, or what can have occasioned the explosion?”

“Oh! Mr. Spilett, nothing is more simple,” answered Pencroft. “A convict vessel is not disciplined like a man-of-war! Convicts are not sailors. Of course the powder-magazine was open, and as they were firing incessantly, some careless or clumsy fellow just blew up the vessel!”

“Captain Harding,” said Herbert, “what astonishes me is that the explosion has not produced more effect. The report was not loud, and besides there are so few planks and timbers torn out. It seems as if the ship had rather foundered than blown up.”

“Does that astonish you, my boy?” asked the engineer.

“Yes, captain.”

“And it astonishes me also, Herbert,” replied he, “but when we visit the hull of the brig, we shall no doubt find the explanation of the matter.”

“Why, captain,” said Pencroft, “you don’t suppose that the ‘Speedy’ simply foundered like a ship which has struck on a rock?”

“Why not,” observed Neb, “if there are rocks in the channel?”

“Nonsense, Neb,” answered Pencroft, “you did not look at the right moment. An instant before she sank, the brig, as I saw perfectly well, rose on an enormous wave, and fell back on her larboard side. Now, if she had only struck, she would have sunk quietly and gone to the bottom like an honest vessel.”

“It was just because she was not an honest vessel!” returned Neb.

“Well, we shall soon see, Pencroft,” said the engineer.

“We shall soon see,” rejoined the sailor, “but I would wager my head there are no rocks in the channel. Look here, captain, to speak candidly, do you mean to say that there is anything marvelous in the occurrence?”

Cyrus Harding did not answer.

“At any rate,” said Gideon Spilett, “whether rock or explosion, you will agree, Pencroft, that it occurred just in the nick of time!”

“Yes! yes!” replied the sailor, “but that is not the question. I ask Captain Harding if he sees anything supernatural in all this.”

“I cannot say, Pencroft,” said the engineer. “That is all the answer I can make.”

A reply which did not satisfy Pencroft at all. He stuck to “an explosion,” and did not wish to give it up. He would never consent to admit that in that channel, with its fine sandy bed, just like the beach, which he had often crossed at low water, there could be an unknown rock.

And besides, at the time the brig foundered, it was high water, that is to say, there was enough water to carry the vessel clear over any rocks which would not be uncovered at low tide. Therefore, there could not have been a collision. Therefore, the vessel had not struck. So she had blown up.

And it must be confessed that the sailor’s arguments were reasonable.

Towards half-past one, the colonists embarked in the boat to visit the wreck. It was to be regretted that the brig’s two boats had not been saved; but one, as has been said, had gone to pieces at the mouth of the Mercy, and was absolutely useless; the other had disappeared when the brig went down, and had not again been seen, having doubtless been crushed.

The hull of the “Speedy” was just beginning to issue from the water. The brig was lying right over on her side, for her masts being broken, pressed down by the weight of the ballast displaced by the shock, the keel was visible along her whole length. She had been regularly turned over by the inexplicable but frightful submarine action, which had been at the same time manifested by an enormous water-spout.

The settlers rowed round the hull, and in proportion as the tide went down, they could ascertain, if not the cause which had occasioned the catastrophe, at least the effect produced.

Towards the bows, on both sides of the keel, seven or eight feet from the beginning of the stem, the sides of the brig were frightfully torn. Over a length of at least twenty feet there opened two large leaks, which would be impossible to stop up. Not only had the copper sheathing and the planks disappeared, reduced, no doubt, to powder, but also the ribs, the iron bolts, and treenails which united them. From the entire length of the hull to the stern the false keel had been separated with an unaccountable violence, and the keel itself, torn from the carline in several places, was split in all its length.

“I’ve a notion!” exclaimed Pencroft, “that this vessel will be difficult to get afloat again.”

“It will be impossible,” said Ayrton.

“At any rate,” observed Gideon Spilett to the sailor, “the explosion, if there has been one, has produced singular effects! It has split the lower part of the hull, instead of blowing up the deck and topsides! These great rents appear rather to have been made by a rock than by the explosion of a powder-magazine.”

“There is not a rock in the channel!” answered the sailor. “I will admit anything you like, except the rock.”

“Let us try to penetrate into the interior of the brig,” said the engineer; “perhaps we shall then know what to think of the cause of her destruction.”

This was the best thing to be done, and it was agreed, besides, to take an inventory of all the treasures on board, and to arrange their preservation.

Access to the interior of the brig was now easy. The tide was still going down and the deck was practicable. The ballast, composed of heavy masses of iron, had broken through in several places. The noise of the sea could be heard as it rushed out at the holes in the hull.

Cyrus Harding and his companions, hatchets in hand, advanced along the shattered deck. Cases of all sorts encumbered it, and, as they had been but a very short time in the water, their contents were perhaps uninjured.

They then busied themselves in placing all this cargo in safety. The water would not return for several hours, and these hours must be employed in the most profitable way. Ayrton and Pencroft had, at the entrance made in the hull, discovered tackle, which would serve to hoist up the barrels and chests. The boat received them and transported them to the shore. They took the articles as they came, intending to sort them afterwards.

At any rate, the settlers saw at once, with extreme satisfaction, that the brig possessed a very varied cargo—an assortment of all sorts of articles, utensils, manufactured goods, and tools—such as the ships which make the great coasting-trade of Polynesia are usually laden with. It was probable that they would find a little of everything, and they agreed that it was exactly what was necessary for the colony of Lincoln Island.

However—and Cyrus Harding observed it in silent astonishment—not only, as has been said, had the hull of the brig enormously suffered from the shock, whatever it was, that had occasioned the catastrophe, but the interior arrangements had been destroyed, especially towards the bows. Partitions and stanchions were smashed, as if some tremendous shell had burst in the interior of the brig. The colonists could easily go fore and aft, after having removed the cases as they were extricated. They were not heavy bales, which would have been difficult to remove, but simple packages, of which the stowage, besides, was no longer recognizable.

The colonists then reached the stern of the brig—the part formerly surmounted by the poop. It was there that, following Ayrton’s directions, they must look for the powder-magazine. Cyrus Harding thought that it had not exploded; that it was possible some barrels might be saved, and that the powder, which is usually enclosed in metal coverings might not have suffered from contact with the water.

This, in fact, was just what had happened. They extricated from among a large number of shot twenty barrels, the insides of which were lined with copper. Pencroft was convinced by the evidence of his own eyes that the destruction of the “Speedy” could not be attributed to an explosion. That part of the hull in which the magazine was situated was, moreover, that which had suffered least.

“It may be so,” said the obstinate sailor; “but as to a rock, there is not one in the channel!”

“Then, how did it happen?” asked Herbert.

“I don’t know,” answered Pencroft, “Captain Harding doesn’t know, and nobody knows or ever will know!”

Several hours had passed during these researches, and the tide began to flow. Work must be suspended for the present. There was no fear of the brig being carried away by the sea, for she was already fixed as firmly as if moored by her anchors.

They could, therefore, without inconvenience, wait until the next day to resume operations; but, as to the vessel itself, she was doomed, and it would be best to hasten to save the remains of her hull, as she would not be long in disappearing in the quicksands of the channel.

It was now five o’clock in the evening. It had been a hard day’s work for the men. They ate with good appetite, and notwithstanding their fatigue, they could not resist, after dinner, their desire of inspecting the cases which composed the cargo of the “Speedy.”

Most of them contained clothes, which, as may be believed, was well received. There were enough to clothe a whole colony—linen for every one’s use, shoes for every one’s feet.

“We are too rich!” exclaimed Pencroft, “But what are we going to do with all this?”

And every moment burst forth the hurrahs of the delighted sailor when he caught sight of the barrels of gunpowder, firearms and sidearms, balls of cotton, implements of husbandry, carpenter’s, joiner’s, and blacksmith’s tools, and boxes of all kinds of seeds, not in the least injured by their short sojourn in the water. Ah, two years before, how these things would have been prized! And now, even though the industrious colonists had provided themselves with tools, these treasures would find their use.

There was no want of space in the store-rooms of Granite House, but that daytime would not allow them to stow away the whole. It would not do also to forget that the six survivors of the “Speedy’s” crew had landed on the island, for they were in all probability scoundrels of the deepest dye, and it was necessary that the colonists should be on their guard against them. Although the bridges over the Mercy were raised, the convicts would not be stopped by a river or a stream and, rendered desperate, these wretches would be capable of anything.

They would see later what plan it would be best to follow; but in the meantime it was necessary to mount guard over cases and packages heaped up near the Chimneys, and thus the settlers employed themselves in turn during the night.

The morning came, however, without the convicts having attempted any attack. Master Jup and Top, on guard at the foot of Granite House, would have quickly given the alarm. The three following days—the 19th, 20th, and 21st of October—were employed in saving everything of value, or of any use whatever, either from the cargo or rigging of the brig. At low tide they overhauled the hold—at high tide they stowed away the rescued articles. A great part of the copper sheathing had been torn from the hull, which every day sank lower. But before the sand had swallowed the heavy things which had fallen through the bottom, Ayrton and Pencroft, diving to the bed of the channel, recovered the chains and anchors of the brig, the iron of her ballast, and even four guns, which, floated by means of empty casks, were brought to shore.

It may be seen that the arsenal of the colony had gained by the wreck, as well as the storerooms of Granite House. Pencroft, always enthusiastic in his projects, already spoke of constructing a battery to command the channel and the mouth of the river. With four guns, he engaged to prevent any fleet, "however powerful it might be," from venturing into the waters of Lincoln Island!

In the meantime, when nothing remained of the brig but a useless hulk, bad weather came on, which soon finished her. Cyrus Harding had intended to blow her up, so as to collect the remains on the shore, but a strong gale from the northeast and a heavy sea compelled him to economize his powder.

In fact, on the night of the 23rd, the hull entirely broke up, and some of the wreck was cast up on the beach.

As to the papers on board, it is useless to say that, although he carefully searched the lockers of the poop, Harding did not discover any trace of them. The pirates had evidently destroyed everything that concerned either the captain or the owners of the "Speedy," and, as the name of her port was not painted on her counter, there was nothing which would tell them her nationality. However, by the shape of her boats Ayrton and Pencroft believed that the brig was of English build.

A week after the catastrophe—or, rather, after the fortunate, though inexplicable, event to which the colony owed its preservation—nothing more could be seen of the vessel, even at low tide. The wreck had disappeared, and Granite House was enriched by nearly all it had contained.

However, the mystery which enveloped its strange destruction would doubtless never have been cleared away if, on the 30th of November, Neb, strolling on the beach, had not found a piece of a thick iron cylinder, bearing traces of explosion. The edges of this cylinder were twisted and broken, as if they had been subjected to the action of some explosive substance.

Neb brought this piece of metal to his master, who was then occupied with his companions in the workshop of the Chimneys.

Cyrus Harding examined the cylinder attentively, then, turning to Pencroft,—

"You persist, my friend," said he, "in maintaining that the 'Speedy' was not lost in consequence of a collision?"

"Yes, captain," answered the sailor. "You know as well as I do that there are no rocks in the channel."

"But suppose she had run against this piece of iron?" said the engineer, showing the broken cylinder.

"What, that bit of pipe!" exclaimed Pencroft in a tone of perfect incredulity.

"My friends," resumed Harding, "you remember that before she foundered the brig rose on the summit of a regular waterspout?"

“Yes, captain,” replied Herbert.

“Well, would you like to know what occasioned that waterspout? It was this,” said the engineer, holding up the broken tube.

“That?” returned Pencroft.

“Yes! This cylinder is all that remains of a torpedo!”

“A torpedo!” exclaimed the engineer’s companions.

“And who put the torpedo there?” demanded Pencroft, who did not like to yield.

“All that I can tell you is, that it was not I,” answered Cyrus Harding; “but it was there, and you have been able to judge of its incomparable power!”

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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THE WANDERER'S NECKLACE by H Rider Haggard

Book II: Byzantium

Chapter VIII: The Trial of Olaf

I know not what time went by before I was put upon my trial, but that trial I can still see as clearly as though it were happening before my eyes. It took place in a long, low room of the vast palace buildings that was lighted only by window-places set high up in the wall. These walls were frescoed, and at the end of the room above the seat of the judges was a rude picture in bright colours of the condemnation of Christ by Pilate. Pilate, I remember, was represented with a black face, to signify his wickedness I suppose, and in the air above him hung a red-eyed imp shaped like a bat who gripped his robe with one claw and whispered into his ear.

There were seven judges, he who presided being a law-officer, and the other six captains of different grades, chosen mostly from among the survivors of those troops whom the Northmen had defeated on the night of the battle in the palace gardens. As this was a military trial, I was allowed no advocate to defend me, nor indeed did I ask for any. The Court, however, was open and crowded with spectators, among whom I saw most of the great officers of the palace, Stauracius with them; also some ladies, one of whom was Martina, my god-mother. The back of the long room was packed with soldiers and others, not all of whom were my enemies.

Into this place I was brought, guarded by four negroes, great fellows armed with swords whom I knew to be chosen out of the number of the executioners of the palace and the city. Indeed, one of them had served under me when I was governor of the State prison, and been dismissed by me because of some cruelty which he had practised.

Noting all these things and the pity in Martina's eyes, I knew that I was already doomed, but as I had expected nothing else this did not trouble me over much.

I stood before the judges, and they stared at me.

"Why do you not salute us, fellow?" asked one of them, a mincing Greek captain whom I had seen running like a hare upon the night of the fray.

"Because, Captain, I am of senior rank to any whom I see before me, and as yet uncondemned. Therefore, if salutes are in the question, it is you who should salute me."

At this speech they stared at me still harder than before, but among the soldiers at the end of the hall there arose something like a murmur of applause.

"Waste no time in listening to his insolence," said the president of the Court. "Clerk, set out the case."

Then a black-robed man who sat beneath the judges rose and read the charge to me from a parchment. It was brief and to the effect that I, Michael, formerly known as Olaf or Olaf Red-Sword, a Northman in the service of the Empress Irene, a general in her armies, a chamberlain and Master of the Palace, had conspired against the Empress, had killed her

servants, had detained her person, threatening to murder her; had made war upon her troops and slain some hundreds of them by the help of other Northmen, and wounded many more.

I was asked what I pleaded to this charge, and replied,

“I am not guilty.”

Then witnesses were called. The first of these was the fourth man whom Irene had set upon me, who alone escaped with a wound behind. This fellow, having been carried into court, for he could not walk, leaned over a bar, for he could not sit down, and told his story. When he had finished I was allowed to examine him.

“Why did the Empress order you and your companions to attack me?” I asked.

“I think because she saw you kiss the Egyptian lady, General,” at which answer many laughed.

“You tried to kill me, did you not?”

“Yes, General, for the Empress ordered us so to do.”

“Then what happened?”

“You killed or cut down three of us one after the other, General, being too skilful and strong for us. As I turned to fly, me you wounded here,” and, dragging himself round with difficulty, he showed how my sword had fallen on a part where no soldier should receive a wound. At this sight those in the Court laughed again.

“Did I provoke you in any way before you attacked me?”

“No, indeed, General. It was the Empress you provoked by kissing the beautiful Egyptian lady. At least, I think so, since every time you kissed each other she seemed to become more mad, and at last ordered us to kill both of you.”

Now the laughter grew very loud, for even the Court officers could no longer restrain themselves, and the ladies hid their faces in their hands and tittered.

“Away with that fool!” shouted the president of the Court, and the poor fellow was hustled out. What became of him afterwards I do not know, though I can guess.

Now appeared witness after witness who told of the fray which I have described already, though for the most part they tried to put another colour on the matter. Of many of these men I asked no questions. Indeed, growing weary of their tales, I said at length to the judges,

“Sirs, what need is there for all this evidence, seeing that among you I perceive three gallant officers whom I saw running before the Northmen that night, when with some four hundred swords we routed about two thousand of you? You yourselves, therefore, are the best witnesses of what befell. Moreover, I acknowledge that, being moved by the sight of war, in the end I led the charge against you, before which charge some died and many fled, you among them.”

Now these captains glowered at me and the president said,

“The prisoner is right. What need is there of more evidence?”

“I think much, sir,” I answered, “since but one side of the story has been heard. Now I will call witnesses, of whom the first should be the Augusta, if she is willing to appear and tell you what happened within the circle of the Northmen on that night.”

“Call the Augusta!” gasped the president. “Perchance, prisoner Michael, you will wish next to call God Himself on your behalf?”

“That, sir,” I answered, “I have already done and do. Moreover,” I added slowly, “of this I am sure, that in a time to come, although it be not to-morrow or the next day, you and everyone who has to do with this case will find that I have not called Him in vain.”

At these words for a few moments a solemn silence fell upon the Court. It was as though they had gone home to the heart of everyone who was present there. Also I saw the curtains that draped a gallery high up in the wall shake a little. It came into my mind that Irene herself was hidden behind those curtains, as afterwards I learned was the case, and that she had made some movement which caused them to tremble.

“Well,” said the president, after this pause, “as God does not appear to be your witness, and as you have no other, seeing that you cannot give evidence yourself under the law, we will now proceed to judgment.”

“Who says that the General Olaf, Olaf Red-Sword, has no witness?” exclaimed a deep voice at the end of the hall. “I am here to be his witness.”

“Who speaks?” asked the president. “Let him come forward.”

There was a disturbance at the end of the hall, and through the crowd that he seemed to throw before him to right and left appeared the mighty form of Jodd. He was clad in full armour and bore his famous battle-axe in his hand.

“One whom some of you know well enough, as others of your company who will never know anything again have done in the past. One named Jodd, the Northman, second in command of the guard to the General Olaf,” he answered, and marched to the spot where witnesses were accustomed to stand.

“Take away that barbarian’s axe,” exclaimed an officer who sat among the judges.

“Aye,” said Jodd, “come hither, mannikin, and take it away if you can. I promise you that along with it something else shall be taken away, to wit your fool’s head. Who are you that would dare to disarm an officer of the Imperial Guard?”

After this there was no more talk of removing Jodd’s axe, and he proceeded to give his evidence, which, as it only detailed what has been written already, need not be repeated. What effect it produced upon the judges, I cannot say, but that it moved those present in the Court was clear enough.

“Have you done?” asked the president at length when the story was finished.

“Not altogether,” said Jodd. “Olaf Red-Sword was promised an open trial, and that he has, since otherwise I and some friends of mine could not be in this Court to tell the truth, where perhaps the truth has seldom been heard before. Also he was promised a fair trial, and that he has not, seeing that the most of his judges are men with whom he fought the other day and who only escaped his sword by flight. To-morrow I propose to ask the people of Byzantium whether it is right that a man should be tried by his conquered enemies. Now I perceive that you will find a verdict of ‘guilty’ against Olaf Red-Sword, and perhaps condemn him to death. Well, find what verdict you will and pass what sentence you will, but do not dare to attempt to execute that sentence.”

“Dare! Dare!” shouted the president. “Who are you, man, who would dictate to a Court appointed by the Empress what it shall or shall not do? Be careful lest we pass sentence on you as well as on your fellow-traitor. Remember where you stand, and that if I lift my finger you will be taken and bound.”

“Aye, lawyer, I remember this and other things. For instance, that I have the safe-conduct of the Empress under an oath sworn on the Cross of the Christ she worships. For instance, also, that I have three hundred comrades waiting my safe return.”

“Three hundred!” snarled the president. “The Empress has three thousand within these walls who will soon make an end of your three hundred.”

“I have been told, lawyer,” answered Jodd, “that once there lived another monarch, one called Xerxes, who thought that he would make an end of a certain three hundred Greeks, when Greeks were different from what you are to-day, at a place called Thermopylæ. He made an end of them, but they cost him more than he cared to pay, and now it is those Greeks who live for ever and Xerxes who is dead. But that’s not all; since that fray the other night we Northmen have found friends. Have you heard of the Armenian legions, President, those who favour Constantine? Well, kill Olaf Red-Sword, or kill me, Jodd, and you have to deal first with the Northmen and next with the Armenian legions. Now here I am waiting to be taken by any who can pass this axe.”

At these words a great silence fell upon the Court. Jodd glared about him, and, seeing that none ventured to draw near, stepped from the witness-place, advanced to where I was, gave me the full salute of ceremony, then marched away to the back of the Court, the crowd opening a path for him.

When he had gone the judges began to consult together, and, as I expected, very soon agreed upon their verdict. The president said, or rather gabbled,

“Prisoner, we find you guilty. Have you any reason to offer why sentence of death should not be passed upon you?”

“Sir,” I answered, “I am not here to plead for my life, which already I have risked a score of times in the service of your people. Yet I would say this. On the night of the outbreak I was set on, four to one, for no crime, as you have heard, and did but protect myself. Afterwards, when I was about to be slain, the Northmen, my comrades, protected me unasked; then I did

my best to save the life of the Empress, and, in fact, succeeded. My only offence is that when the great charge took place and your regiments were defeated, remembering only that I was a soldier, I led that charge. If this is a crime worthy of death, I am ready to die. Yet I hold that both God and man will give more honour to me the criminal than to you the judges, and to those who before ever you sat in this Court instructed you, whom I know to be but tools, as to the verdict that you should give.”

The applause which my words called forth from those gathered at the end of the Court died away. In the midst of a great silence the president, who, like his companions, I could see well, was growing somewhat fearful, read the sentence in a low voice from a parchment. After setting out the order by which the Court was constituted and other matters, it ran:

“We condemn you, Michael, otherwise called Olaf or Olaf Red-Sword, to death. This sentence will be executed with or without torture at such time and in such manner as it may please the Augusta to decree.”

Now the voice of Jodd was heard crying through the gathering gloom, for night was near:

“What sort of judgment is this that the judges bring already written down into the Court? Harken you, lawyer, and you street-curs, his companions, who call yourselves soldiers. If Olaf Red-Sword dies, those hostages whom we hold die also. If he is tortured, those hostages will be tortured also. Moreover, ere long we will sack this fine place, and what has befallen Olaf shall befall you also, you false judges, neither less nor more. Remember it, all you who shall have charge of Olaf in his bonds, and, if she be within hearing, let the Augusta Irene remember it also, lest another time there should be no Olaf to save her life.”

Now I could see that the judges were terrified. Hastily, with white faces, they consulted together as to whether they should order Jodd to be seized. Presently I heard the president say to his companions:

“Nay, best let him go. If he is touched, our hostages will die. Moreover, doubtless Constantine and the Armenians are at the back of him, or he would not dare to speak thus. Would that we were clear of this business which has been thrust upon us.”

Then he called aloud, “Let the prisoner be removed.”

Down the long Court I was marched, only now guards, who had been called in, went in front of and behind me, and with them the four executioners by whom I was surrounded.

“Farewell, god-mother,” I whispered to Martina as I passed.

“Nay, not farewell,” she whispered back, looking up at me with eyes that were full of tears, though what she meant I did not know.

At the end of the Court, where those who dared to sympathise with me openly were gathered, rough voices called blessings on me and rough hands patted me on the shoulder. To one of these men whose voice I recognised in the gloom I turned to speak a word. Thereon the black executioner who was between us, he whom I had dismissed from the jail for cruelty, struck me on the mouth with the back of his hand. Next instant I heard a sound that reminded me of the growl the white bear gave when it gripped Steinar. Two arms shot out and caught that

black savage by the head. There was a noise as of something breaking, and down went the man—a corpse.

Then they hurried me away, for now it was not only the judges who were afraid.

It comes to me that for some days, three or four, I sat in my cell at the palace, for here I was kept because, as I learned afterwards, it was feared that if I were removed to that State prison of which I had been governor, some attempt would be made to rescue me.

This cell was one of several situated beneath that broad terrace which looked out on to the sea, where Irene had first questioned me as to the shell necklace and, against my prayer, had set it upon her own breast. It had a little barred window, out of which I could watch the sea, and through this window came the sound of sentries tramping overhead and of the voice of the officer who, at stated hours, arrived to turn out the guard, as for some years it had been my duty to do.

I wondered who that officer might be, and wondered also how many of such men since Byzantium became the capital of the Empire had filled his office and mine, and what had become of them all. As I knew, if that terrace had been able to speak, it could have told many bloody histories, whereof doubtless mine would be another. Doubtless, too, there were more to follow until the end came, whatever that might be.

In that strait place I reflected on many things. All my youth came back to me. I marvelled what had happened at Aar since I left it such long years ago. Once or twice rumours had reached me from men in my company, who were Danish-born, that Iduna was a great lady there and still unmarried. But of Freydisa I had heard nothing. Probably she was dead, and, if so, I felt sure that her fierce and faithful spirit must be near me now, as that of Ragnar had seemed to be in the Battle of the Garden.

How strange it was that after all my vision had been fulfilled and it had been my lot to meet her of whom I had dreamed, wearing that necklace of which I had found one-half upon the Wanderer in his grave-mound. Were I and the Wanderer the same spirit, I asked of myself, and she of the dream and Heliodore the same woman?

Who could tell? At least this was sure, from the moment that first we saw one another we knew we belonged each to each for the present and the future. Therefore, as it was with these we had to do, the past might sleep and all its secrets.

Now we had met but to be parted again by death, which seemed hard indeed. Yet since we had met, for my part Fate had my forgiveness for I knew that we should meet again. I looked back on what I had done and left undone, and could not blame myself overmuch. True, it would have been wiser if I had stayed by Irene and Heliodore, and not led that charge against the Greeks. Only then, as a soldier, I should never have forgiven myself, for how could I stand still while my comrades fought for me? No, no, I was glad I had led the charge and led it well, though my life must pay its price. Nor was this so. I must die, not because I had lifted sword against Irene's troops, but for the sin of loving Heliodore.

After all, what was life as we knew it? A passing breath! Well, as the body breathes many million times between the cradle and the grave, so I believed the soul must breathe out its

countless lives, each ending in a form of death. And beyond these, what? I did not know, yet my new-found faith gave me much comfort.

In such meditations and in sleep I passed my hours, waiting always until the door of my cell should open and through it appear, not the jailer with my food, which I noted was plentiful and delicate, but the executioners or mayhap the tormentors.

At length it did open, somewhat late at night, just as I was about to lay myself down to rest, and through it came a veiled woman. I bowed and motioned to my visitor to be seated on the stool that was in the cell, then waited in silence. Presently she threw off her veil, and in the light of the lamp showed that I stood before the Empress Irene.

“Olaf,” she said hoarsely, “I am come here to save you from yourself, if it may be so. I was hidden in yonder Court, and heard all that passed at your trial.”

“I guessed as much, Augusta,” I said, “but what of it?”

“For one thing, this: The coward and fool, who now is dead—of his wounds—who gave evidence as to the killing of the three other cowards by you, has caused my name to become a mock throughout Constantinople. Aye, the vilest make songs upon me in the streets, such songs as I cannot repeat.”

“I am grieved, Augusta,” I said.

“It is I who should grieve, not you, who are told of as a man who grew weary of the love of an Empress, and cast her off as though she were a tavern wench. That is the first matter. The second is that under the finding of the Court of Justice—”

“Oh! Augusta,” I interrupted, “why stain your lips with those words ‘of justice’!”

“—Under the finding of the Court,” she went on, “your fate is left in my hands. I may kill you or torment your body. Or I may spare you and raise your head higher than any other in the Empire, aye, and adorn it with a crown.”

“Doubtless you may do any of these things, Augusta, but which of them do you wish to do?”

“Olaf, notwithstanding all that has gone, I would still do the last. I speak to you no more of love or tenderness, nor do I pretend that this is for your sake alone. It is for mine also. My name is smirched, and only marriage can cover up the stain upon it. Moreover, I am beset by troubles and by dangers. Those accursed Northmen, who love you so well and who fight, not like men but like devils, are in league with the Armenian legions and with Constantine. My generals and my troops fall away from me. If it were assailed, I am not sure that I could hold this palace, strong though it be. There’s but one man who can make me safe again, and that man is yourself. The Northmen will do your bidding, and with you in command of them I fear no attack. You have the honesty, the wit and the soldier’s skill and courage. You must command, or none. Only this time it must not be as Irene’s lover, for that is what they name you, but as her husband. A priest is waiting within call, and one of high degree. Within an hour, Olaf, you may be my consort, and within a year the Emperor of the World. Oh!” she went on with passion, “cannot you forgive what seem to be my sins when you remember that they were wrought for love of you?”

“Augusta,” I said, “I have small ambition; I am not minded to be an emperor. But hearken. Put aside this thought of marriage with one so far beneath you, and let me marry her whom I have chosen, and who has chosen me. Then once more I’ll take command of the Northmen and defend you and your cause to the last drop of my blood.”

Her face hardened.

“It may not be,” she said, “not only for those reasons I have told you, but for another which I grieve to have to tell. Heliodore, daughter of Magas the Egyptian, is dead.”

“Dead!” I gasped. “Dead!”

“Aye, Olaf, dead. You did not see, and she, being a brave woman, hid it from you, but one of those spears that were flung in the fight struck her in the side. For a while the wound went well. But two days ago it mortified; last night she died and this morning I myself saw her buried with honour.”

“How did you see her buried, you who are not welcome among the Northmen?” I asked.

“By my order, as her blood was high, she was laid in the palace graveyard, Olaf.”

“Did she leave me no word or token, Augusta? She swore to me that if she died she would send to me the other half of that necklace which I wear.”

“I have heard of none,” said Irene, “but you will know, Olaf, that I have other business to attend to just now than such death-bed gossip. These things do not come to my ears.”

I looked at Irene and Irene looked at me.

“Augusta,” I said, “I do not believe your story. No spear wounded Heliodore while I was near her, and when I was not near her your Greeks were too far away for any spears to be thrown. Indeed, unless you stabbed her secretly, she was not wounded, and I am sure that, however much you have hated her, this you would not have dared to do for your own life’s sake. Augusta, for your own purposes you are trying to deceive me. I will not marry you. Do your worst. You have lied to me about the woman whom I love, and though I forgive you all the rest, this I do not forgive. You know well that Heliodore still lives beneath the sun.”

“If so,” answered the Empress, “you have looked your last upon the sun and—her. Never again shall you behold the beauty of Heliodore. Have you aught to say? There is still time.”

“Nothing, Augusta, at present, except this. Of late I have learned to believe in a God. I summon you to meet me before that God. There we will argue out our case and abide His judgment. If there is no God there will be no judgment, and I salute you, Empress, who triumph. If, as I believe and as you say you believe, there is a God, think whom you will be called upon to salute when that God has heard the truth. Meanwhile I repeat that Heliodore the Egyptian still lives beneath the sun.”

Irene rose from the stool on which she sat and thought a moment. I gazed through the bars of the window-place in my cell out at the night above. A young moon was floating in the sky,

and near to it hung a star. A little passing cloud with a dented edge drifted over the star and the lower horn of the moon. It went by, and they shone out again upon the background of the blue heavens. Also an owl flitted across the window-place of my cell. It had a mouse in its beak, and the shadow of it and of the writhing mouse for a moment lay upon Irene's breast, for I turned my head and saw them. It came into my mind that here was an allegory. Irene was the night-hawk, and I was the writhing mouse that fed its appetite. Doubtless it was decreed that the owl must be and the mouse must be, but beyond them both, hidden in those blue heavens, stood that Justice which we call God.

These were the last things that I saw in this life of mine, and therefore I remember them well, or rather, almost the last. The very last of which I took note was Irene's face. It had grown like to that of a devil. The great eyes in it stared out between the puffed and purple eyelids. The painted cheeks had sunk in and were pallid beneath and round the paint. The teeth showed in two white lines, the chin worked. She was no longer a beautiful woman, she was a fiend.

Irene knocked thrice upon the door. Bolts were thrown back, and men entered.

"Blind him!" she said.

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