

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 14, ISSUE 4
23RD/30TH DECEMBER
2018

**ROGER
BAILEY'S
LAST REPAST**
BY GRAHAM
GARDENER—
A TALE OF
HUBRIS...

SHREDDERS
BY STEPHEN
HERNANDEZ—
AN INCURSION
OF SOME
MAGNITUDE...

**CHRISTMAS
AND NEW YEAR
EDITION**

**THE STALLS OF
BARCHESTER
CATHEDRAL BY
MR JAMES**

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Schlock! Webzine

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John C Adams, Graham Gardener, Gregory KH Bryant, Rob Bliss, H Rider Haggard, A Merritt*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 14, Issue 4

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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!

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

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

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *Ghost of Christmas Future with Ebenezer Scrooge in the Graveyard* by *Jim the Photographer*. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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EDITORIAL

Ho, ho, ho, bah humbug, Merry Christmas, Good Yule, Happy Solstice, Bon Noel and/or the seasonal greeting of your choice. In this festive Christmas and New Year edition we have a horrific cartoon from Vincent Davis, eerie poetry from Sandro Fossemò, and a tragic tale from Graham Gardner, while Stephen Hernandez tells us of a terrible war.

Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without any ghost stories, so as well as Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Future on the cover, we have a Christmas ghost story courtesy of the inestimable MR James. John C Adams reviews a book on writing horror. Rob Bliss' Vampire / Necrophile saga reaches paradise. And Carter Ward is brought into the presence of Horst Dal. Eric Brighteyes falls in love. And down in The Moon Pool, the explorers reach the gateway of the Portal.

See you in the New Year!

—Gavin Chappell

Now out from Rogue Planet Press: [*Schlock Quarterly Volume 3, Issue 6*](#).

AUTUMN 2018

Schlock! Quarterly

Includes Two
Episodes of
Sword and
Planet epic
**THE CAVES
OF MARS**

**KASSI AND
THE SWORD**
Ste Whitehouse

**IN THE
NORTHWOODS**

BY ROB BLISS

Plus Four More Stories
from the thrilling pages of
Schlock! Webzine

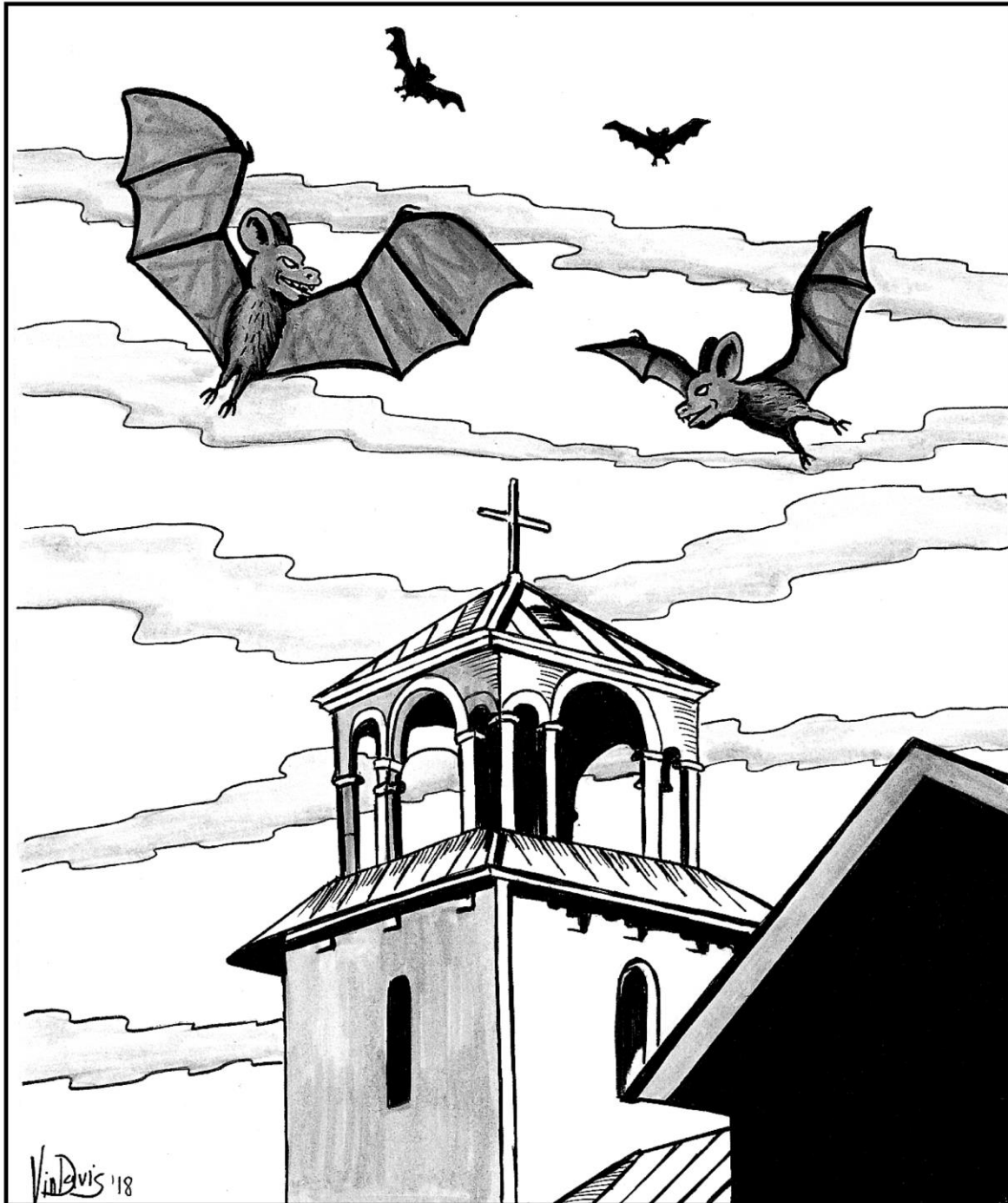


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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"AND THEN SHE TELLS ME TO GO **HANG** MYSELF AND I'M LIKE
WHAT? LIKE IN A GOOD WAY?"

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

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

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

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

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

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CHRISTMAS EMOTIONS / THE BAT by Sandro Fossemò

Christmas Emotions

The crib became a starry paradise,
where Jesus was born to kings' delight.
The stable warms with me near,
where logs burn in the fireplace here.
A magical heat spreads from candles red to walls cold sharp,
where God beats the wind from His breath to His heart.
I then notice dim green branches of pine,
where coloured icicles sparkle and shine.
I walk freely and willingly,
where bright to pathways lanterns bring.
The planets of the Christmas tree orbit the comet,
where the kingdom of heaven is our object.
Nebulae and constellations shine on cosmos' of glass misted,
where snowmen lay in the ice isolated.
The Holy Night fills my heart with gaiety,
where the snow falls in a world void of eternity.
And I hear a sweet melody from near and far churches sing,
where angels make bells in those towers ring.

The Bat

A demon circles above
in the howling wind.
In the blackness of the night its presence is menacing over the rooftops,
like the spectre of a sombre midnight.
That large bat no longer inhabits its castle.

Astride my horse I observe its fatal flight,
gladdened by the sight near a medieval town.
Atop the rocky summit I feel a hidden yearning,
that separates me from the synthetic hologram.

To that bat...
I wish to say: "Nevermore sombre swamps,
without the presence of fungi from Yuggoth!"

The broken bell of the black tower was once loved
in a past long ago echoing with abandoned magic.
Pure beauty are the mouldering walls and the gargoyle,
beauty in a chasm of illusions and sadness.

To that bat...

I wish to say: "Nevermore may civilisation be superior,
without the riches of ancient times!"

The white bones of skeletons wander the theatres,
imprisoned within dark forbidding shows.
Grey tombs await the newly-risen and the ghouls
against a backdrop of deserted mountains.

To that bat...

I wish to say: "Nevermore the sadly rustling leaves,
so quickly attached to oblivion!"

You live in the nocturnal vault,
rather than die in the daytime madness.
You enter a wine cellar,
to savour the body of a red wine.
Be bats,
dream Arkham wrapped in your cloak.
Perform a Necronomicon ritual in secret,
call Yog-Sothoth with an amulet.
Wander the solitary lonely avenues
to hide yourselves in the mouldering ruins.

To that bat...

I wish to say: "Nevermore near the lamp posts,
burnt by its artificial light.

I can no longer find shadows for my hiding places,
nowhere for me to unfurl my claws.
The sinister orchestra of nature plays no more,
no more symphony of fear to enjoy.

To that bat...

I wish to say: "Nevermore isolated in the desolate night,
without the splendour of the enchanted stars!"

We no longer feel a shiver,
watching the leaden sky cracked by lightening.
We no longer feel such vital emotion,
seeing the Northern Lights shine on the ice.

To that bat...

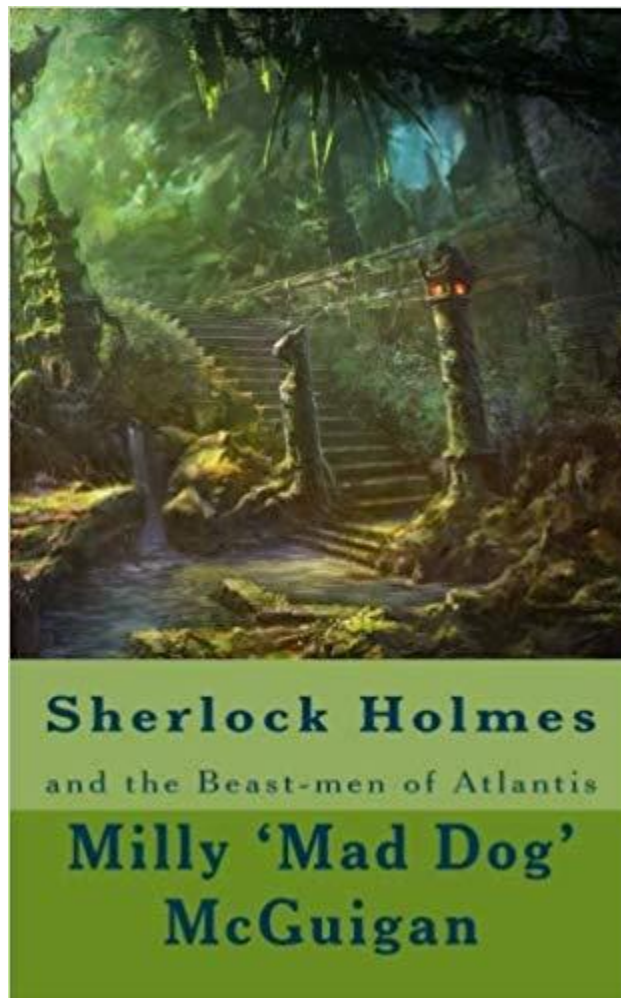
I wish to say: "Fly towards Polaris,
so we are no longer simulated
in the alien emptiness of planned worlds."

Magical obscurity dissolves a paralysing universe.
Unknown constellations appear in a fascinating sky.
The song of the sidereal wind seals an ancestral dream.

I will watch as meteorites fall and the decay is buried.
The Great Old Ones will teach freedom to the new human race.
With my tentacles I will pass from the folds of time to the columns of a temple,
while slaughtering the masses with my jaws.

To that bat...
I wish to say: "Nevermore a cosmic bloodless night,
where my existence merely languishes!"

THE END



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ROGER BAILEY'S LAST REPAST by Graham Gardener

OFFICER JOHN BOUCHER (UFFERN GATE PRISON)

- Existing circumstances:

Like all tragedy, the story of young Jones was one of hubris. Jones saw the injustice of the system. But, he thought he could work for justice within it. He wrote letters for prisoners and proved them with small comforts. This caused resentment with the other guards and is, I believe, the main reason for the incident.

I include Jones' account as part of my own report and recommendations.

PRISON WARDEN GARETH JONES

Incident Report:

I had been on shift since the turnover of fourth bell. The thick steak steamed as I carried it into Bailey's cell. It looked and smelled quite delicious. I was informed by the other guards that it was not the meal he had requested. But given the unreasonable nature of his request, I did not expect him to be surprised.

Bailey pulled against his shackles leaning backwards and looking away from the plate. He looked up at me as if he were still waiting for the food to arrive.

"This is not what I asked for."

Roger Bailey kissed his brown splintered teeth. I kept my eyes on the plate to avoid making eye contact with him. Remembering my training, I focused my eyes on a spot on his forehead to appear fully attentive.

"The last meal is a privilege not a right. It does not cover requests as unusual as yours nor is it a maître d' service."

Bailey stuck his tongue out between his teeth and hung his head.

"It would have been a small mercy to show a man condemned in this world and the next," he said.

The idea of Bailey pleading for any mercy was farcical to me. I struggled not to seem contemptuous of the statement.

"Mercy?" I asked him.

"Even a sinner deserves compassion, that's why the Lord trapped the light in man," he told me.

“Our chef is not willing to either collect or prepare what you requested. You have forty minutes to finish your meal before the gallows men take you.”

As I moved to turn I watched Roger Bailey’s thin face dart about the room. There was a frantic madness in that search that I couldn’t help but pity. His chains clanked, an urgent pulling.

“Up there, up there,” he cried.

He was gesturing to the corner of the room, pulling hard on the iron bands that held his wrists. I felt sure he must be injuring himself.

“Will you let me have one, it’s not like I’ll ever trouble you for anything else.”

I shook my head and repeated my refusal. Roger Bailey clasped his hands together and held them up to me as if in supplication to his god. His eyes brimmed with tears and his voice cracked.

“Please, please help me,” he said, “I’m going to die.”

I was filled with a most unpleasant sensation and could not stand his gaze any further. So, I made the mistake of humouring him. He was secure and I have never believed his claims of special powers. Madness is madness. He was secure.

I reached up to the far corner of the room and cupped my hands around the spinning cob that lived there.

“Get some of the webs too,” said Roger Bailey.

I emptied my hands out onto his plate and the spider looked panic as it attempted to move through the pepper sauce. Bailey picked up his fork, stabbed it into the spider and then chewed it with relish.

“You’re a lunatic,” I told him.

I will never forget the way that Roger Bailey laughed at me. The sound of it echoing off the cell walls; as full of ages as the granite.

He put both of his thumbs into his mouth and there was a sound as though he were choking. I stepped forward to remove the digits from his mouth. I did not want him cheating the crowds or the gallows. His arms moved with such speed that I did not see his hands slip out of the restraints.

He grabbed my collar in both hands and as he pulled me forward I watched as if time itself had slowed. The blood and tissue of his thumbs were spat forward into my face.

I had a second of confusion and that is when Roger Bailey bit into my cheek. His teeth were even sharper than they looked and as I pulled away I could see a lump of my own flesh in his mouth.

The pain must have put me in shock and I fell backwards, my hand involuntarily clutching my injured face. I with my feet and managed to scramble backwards.

Bailey's foot shackles were still firmly intact. His body crawling towards me as if his legs my stretch to extend his reach. I could feel his fingers clutching at the tips of my feet. There was nothing in those frantic eyes but hunger. His fixed rictus devoid of thought and feeling. I raised the alarm. Three officers then entered the room to assist me.

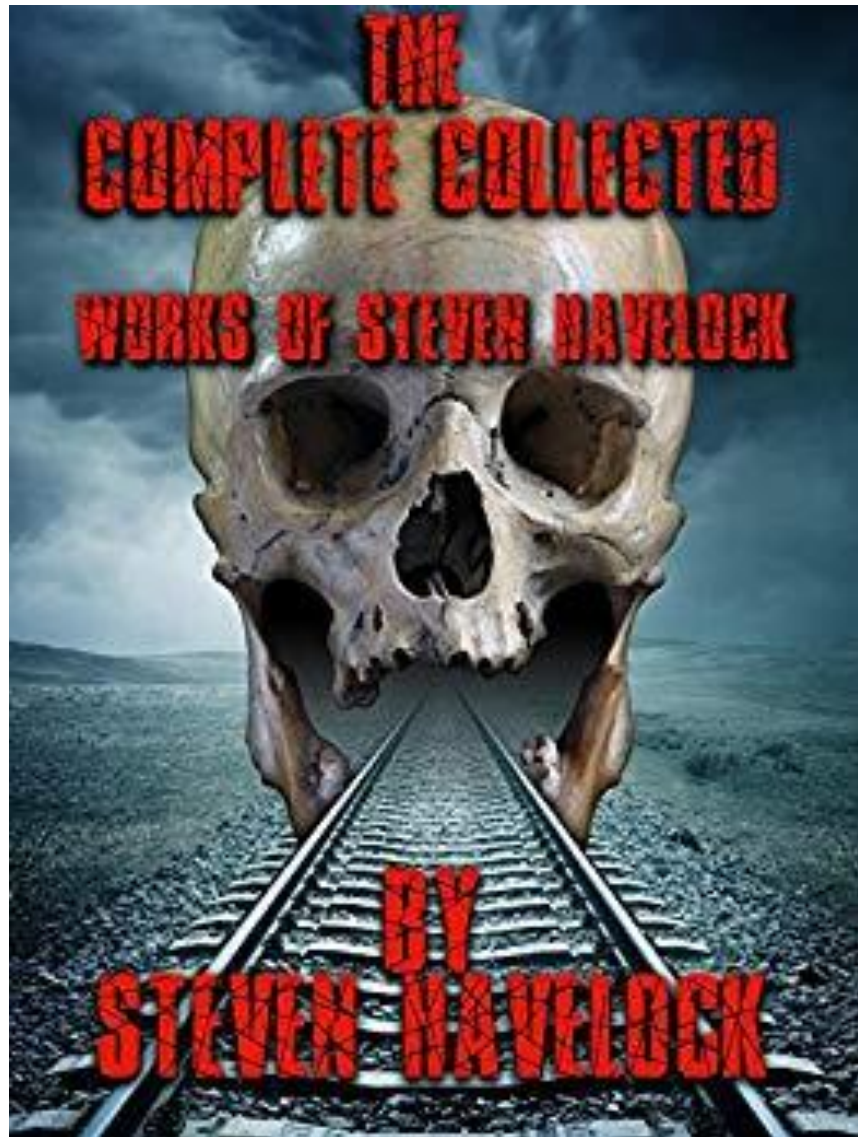
I am aware of the difficulties my lack of resilience around the prisoner has caused and accept full responsibility for the incident.

OFFICER JOHN BOUCHER

Actions Taken:

Jones was given immediate medical attention. Once bandaged, I placed upon him the duty of removing Bailey's teeth with a claw hammer. I am reasonably assured that Jones has learned the folly of kindness and the cruelty that it leads to. I have suspended him from duty without pay until he is fully recovered. It is my considered opinion that, with his new scars and new attitude, Jones will go onto be a most valuable employee. In order to discourage future incidents of the sort I broke Bailey's legs and let him hang on the platform.

THE END



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SHREDDERS by Stephen Hernandez

HOURL 1: The carefully regulated supplies of energy cells and food compounds were sporadically disappearing from the Fraenum Quadrant. A preliminary investigation carried out by some rather disinterested detectives who had been pulled from far more important cases, in their opinion, had put this down to natural lossage, but when some of the supplies had been partially recovered it was discovered they had apparently been randomly destroyed rather than consumed. There had been no regard for the containers' contents and the perpetrators had not done much about concealing the crimes. It could only mean one thing: sabotage. The old enemy—the aliens—must have somehow managed to get past the first line of orbiting defence vessels: lone, roaming Corvette-Class Shredder ships and deployed Commando style tactics in and behind the front line to pinpoint and infiltrate that particular Quadrant which was below its usual defensive parameters. A fact that was known to only a few members of the powers-that-be.

The Shredders, or gerolf maximum-deterrent gestalt parçalama super-fragmenting devices, to give them their proper name (they could not devise an acronym for them so they just got stuck with a convenient sobriquet of what they generally did—shred matter, shred any matter that did not belong in human space), were designed to cover large tracts of empty space, and simply by their bellicose presence to actively dissuade rather than engage in all-out combat. Although, a Shredder's idea of dissuasion when unauthorised vessels entered human-controlled space was usually to destroy with maximum prejudice and ask questions later. This anarchic behaviour sometimes caused friction in the pyramidically delineated defence hierarchy (those at the top liked a well-ordered problem free existence, as much as possible, as they had more esoteric matters to attend to), but whatever protestations that arose were nearly always put aside as Shredders were Shredders—it was what they did. It was their *raison d'être*....

The minor interruption in supplies to the Fraenum Quadrant was not a major problem in itself. There were plenty of stored reserves of food in orbiting food pods and hidden dumps within the Quadrant, and humans could generate more than enough power to compensate for any energy shortages, but it did mean that the aliens had once again penetrated human-controlled space (HCS)—a situation which could not be tolerated. The powers-that-be made that abundantly clear. What had started as a minor irritant was now a major headache and it must be stopped before there was major disruption affecting all of HCS.

The fact that the aliens had penetrated so far into HCS so easily, and that they were now in a position in which they were able to attack the established human supply routes was of grave concern—it hinted at conspiracy (how else could it have been accomplished virtually undetected?). The military started running checks on likely fifth columnists. Meanwhile, the aliens could not be allowed to gain any kind of foothold. These were the orders that stood....

HOURS 3:30: An incursion of any magnitude usually proved costly in the end so the powers-to-be had at last turned a large part of their attention to the matter. The politically motivated powers-that-be (sometimes known as The Grey Collective) usually rubbed along fairly well with the military, but in times of crisis old frictions were bound to arise and the exchanges sometimes became overheated. Generally they calmed down after a while but grudges were kept score of. The Grey Collective had a very long memory.

Scouts and probes were streamed to investigate at maximum speed, which was rumoured by some to be nearly as fast as the speed of thought but which could be measured in heartbeats. When the powers-to-be wished to know about something that meant pronto.... When it came it was not good news. What had looked like a minor incursion now appeared to have all the hallmarks of a major invasion. It had had been implemented so subversively, and executed with such speed and cunning that the humans' intelligence services (much to the powers-that-be disgust) had only become aware of it at the last possible moment, and by then it was already a military matter. Defence units were in full combat mode before the first alerts had even finished sounding. War fever took over.

Human resistance cells were called up to halt any further advances whilst the powers-that-be drew up their strategies. Each resistance cell was an entire, independent offensive/defensive unit—together they were known as The White Fleet. Each unit was equipped with all the latest gadgets, gizmos and weapons the humans could devise in their ceaseless quest for the domination of space. This equipment overkill made them quite ponderous when it came to mobility. In fact, some of them could take up to three or four milliseconds to get into a tactical position. It was why they were generally preferred to be kept in the rear until there was a full scale battle, or, as in this case, delineate a defence line. Strike offensives were usually left to speed kings like the Shredder 'Exterminator Class' Destroyers. The powers-that-be would use the resistance cells to do the thing they were best at—resist, and keep the Shredders in reserve until the moment they could inflict the most damage. They powers-that-be wanted to know what sort of numbers they were up against before they increased the heat.

The aliens were known as the Adonins. They had been mankind's enemy since time immemorial. It was said they had been there at the very moment of the creation of human life, perhaps all life. But the Adonins were more like machines than living beings. And they were more like space ships when compared to any kind of machine. Each ship was identical when it was born, built, evolutionized, or created (according to whichever theology you did or did not adhere to), but it was known as a fact that each ship—regardless of how it was produced—was a solitary and individual Adonin—each ship was a living being, if it could be termed/defined as such. These vessels/ships were seldom motionless although when they were not in combat formations they seemed to float around aimlessly. They were able to adapt, or physically transmogrify at any moment, in any given circumstance, to keep moving. If they could not they simply self-destructed.

The war between Man and Adonin had been going on for so long now that no-one could remember or even speculate when it had begun, or who had started it and for what reason. Some people thought it had existed since the dawn of mankind. The bones of innumerable scholars who had studied such things had long since turned to dust. They died in vain without ever coming close to the answer. Some thought that the war had always existed and that it was the natural state of the Universe. Without war, they argued, there would be no life. The peacemakers, or appeasers, maintained that peace could be made and a meaningful balance constructed that would be beneficial to both sides without the pointless annihilation—the Universe was big enough for all forms of life. Apparently, it was not nearly big enough to accommodate both Man and Adonin, so they marched hand-in-hand to their inevitable doom.

Adonin bodies mostly consisted of huge, matt black, globes covered in super sharp magnetised spikes. The nearest human equivalent in appearance to their basic form was a naval mine, both in texture and appearance. Usually they would just float around in outer space without any apparent plan except when they chanced to come into the radius of a Shredder with the inevitable fatal result for the Adonin.

When they chose to move with intention, especially in combat, they could move at incredible speed, and could out-distance and out-manoeuver any craft the humans could throw at them apart from Shredders. The spikes were used to pierce and cling onto their victims hulls. If the victim happened to be much larger than themselves they simply grew or used sheer numbers to overwhelm it—crude but effective. They could innovate, seemingly at will, transmogrify not only their physical shape but its size to some extent as well. They were made of some unknown, unidentifiable material which mankind had never been able to replicate. There was no known substance in the human world in which to compare an Adonin's body's material. If a piece of Adonin 'flesh' was captured it changed into myriad different forms before dissolving completely without any trace—an impossible feat except for an Adonin. And everywhere humans went they found Adonins. Every scientist in history had declared the impossibility of their existence in the end, but yet exist they did. And it looked like they would never go away, or declare a truce, or make peace with mankind. Not that they were adverse to killing and feeding from other species of warm-blooded animals. Anything that contained blood was prey, but human bodies were bloated with the most blood and the sweetest, and Adonins found it irresistible. Their aim was one thing only: to land and penetrate a human home vessel—choc-a-bloc with blood.

When one of the spiked vessels landed, indefatigably identifiable as an Adonin, it enslaved anything alive within its immediate radius with a chemical brainwash that left the hapless victim completely in its control. It then used the victim or victims (an Adonin would sometimes subjugate several prisoners at once), to drag its huge, loathsome bulk across the uneven terrain of a home vessel. If the terrain was smooth enough the Adonin simply rolled. But the Adonin vessels in some ways were doggedly intractable once they had managed to land on the solid surface. It was as if once they had achieved their goal—their sole purpose since conception—they lost all other incentives apart from finding an entrance to the impregnable fortress of the home vessel, (through a portal into its underbelly), and the chance of blood—the chance to feed. They would wander around aimlessly until they either perished or found a portal, which was nigh impossible. It was as if they could not think for themselves anymore. This had led to the hypothesis that they shared some kind of hive mentality but this was scoffed at by most leading scientists as a complete Adonin hive had never been discovered, and no-one was sure how they actually communicated in the first place. So the more popular hypothesis remained that they were mere machines, perhaps self-evolved android in origin, and were pre-programmed by a complex code—something like human DNA perhaps. Their behaviour on the surface of human living vessels was bizarre to say the least. For example, it would trundle along searching for the portal/entrance but would become stuck when meeting an unmovable object by its own sharp spikes, or, perhaps simply fall into a crater and be unable to move or be moved, like a golf ball stuck in a bunker—like a machine it would repeat its useless movements until it was exhausted and it ground to a stop. Once bereft of movement all its energy seemed to evaporate, and it would decompose very quickly, back into the nothingness from which it had emerged. As the

Adonins' main battle tactic was in overwhelming the opposition through sheer numbers, their skill, if it could be called such, was in reproducing, or making copies of themselves, which they did unceasingly if allowed. They only needed one ingredient—blood.

HOURS 3:45:10 The White Fleet, the apotheosis of the Armed Forces, was summoned—the super-massive carriers sailed immediately. They were so huge that everything in their vicinity seemed to gravitate towards them. They would be behind the vanguard of the remaining Corvette-Class Shredders who were nearly always used for suicide missions, and this was one if ever there was. The Shredders were fanatical kamikazes who did not know the meaning of fear, or even life and death. They were born to do what they did. They were living death. A Shredder had never been taken prisoner alive—an injured Shredder would rather self-destruct than allow itself to be taken captive, and if it could take an enemy with it, so much the better. There were no leaders or different ranks within the Shredders. One for all and all for one could most definitely be applied as their motto. It was not so fanciful, as some had suggested to much scorn, that they could share a hive mind much like the Adonins, although no-one had presumed to venture such a hypothesis to a Shredder—not within attacking distance anyway.

Adonins that ever did manage to get within the perimeters of the huge vessels of the White Fleet were instantly exterminated. All too late the isolated alien vessels would realise it was a trap—they were caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand getting too near the resistance's flag vessels meant instant death, on the other hand, retreating and waiting for reinforcements meant they were open to rear-guard attacks by the Shredders. The first attack was easily repelled in the end. The pieces of the empty hulls of the alien vessels floated in space like so much chaff only to be grinded to dust by any Shredder that came across even the semblance of anything alien—such was the Shredders inbuilt hatred of intruders. The powers-that-be warned that this was only a prelude. Their strength was merely being tested. Now, the real invasion would begin.

The Shredders impatiently waited for the next wave of attack. All the alarms had been sounded. This was now officially a red alert. There was tremendous activity at every level. Coordination would be the main problem. Withdrawing forces from other zones could leave these in turn vulnerable to other enemies—other aliens, but at that particular moment the Adonins posed the biggest threat. The rest of the human force would have to be rapidly assembled with the least amount of perturbation to the overall defensive force which was already weak—this was what the Grey Collective did best.

This same or similar battle scenario had played out a thousand times, but each time it was slightly different. Victories were always hard fought—the alternative was unthinkable....

HOURS: 3:48:42 The invaders had one weakness—acid. It was the last resort if any managed to land on human territory. The Shredders preferred a more physical, direct approach but the flying machines were useless on land. The aliens attacked the least likely outpost as they always did, in the dark, and as far away from the main line of defence as possible. They were after blood, as always. They needed the stuff, and plenty of it to start the reproduction process, and they would go to any length to obtain it. But this was no random attack, it may have appeared opportunistic but it was the Adonin way—instant improvisation was the key to their success and within

seconds they had found the one point where they were mostly likely to circumvent the hastily erected human shield.

Even so only a very few of the Adonins made it through. The Adonins that were repelled by the resistance floated off into space, where they were at the mercy of the Shredders. And the Shredders did not know the meaning of mercy. What was left of the Adonins by the Shredders fell in minute particles to the ground where their components, whatever they were, were dissolved in acid.

The human defence force rapidly re-deployed. The defence was quickly divided into millions of units and surrounded the human home vessels. The idea was to ring the human habitats with self-contained fortresses, each of which could operate as an independent unit even if it was surrounded. The home vessels were to all intents and purposes impregnable. However, they did have one small weakness: barely discernible portals which could only be opened if you had the right key or code. A code so complex that hardly any Adonins ever gained entry. If they managed it they would feast on the human blood they craved and then reproduce. Humans only consisted of blood vessels for the Adonins—the rest was unimportant. Blood was the only thing that mattered. Humans were little more than blood sacks to them. That was if Adonins actually felt or thought in human terms.

HOURS: 3:50:10 The Shredders were still having a field day mopping-up the first wave of attack. Shredders were a living terror to have as an enemy or as in this case—executioner. They attacked what was left of the Adonins from all sides as they lived up to their name and reputation and literally shredded the enemy to pieces. They pulled and ripped the Adonins apart mercilessly. Whatever was left of an Adonin after an encounter with a Shredder, which was usually not much, was swept up by the White Fleet. Any Adonins trying to retreat, or those that rarely managed to escape, wounded, after an encounter with a Shredder were taken care of by the Fleet.

The first wave of attack had been thoroughly routed but the Grey Collective knew that it would only be a matter of time before the Adonins came again. And this time it would be in much larger numbers. The first attack was just to see what the resistances' tactics would be and to test out their strengths, and weaknesses. Now would come the full frontal attack and there would be no let up.

The intelligence from the White Fleet had not been exaggerated. It was a huge invasion. If anything, they had underestimated the strength of the enemy. Urgent messages were sent for even more reinforcements, but the second wave of the attack had already started. All the Shredders were unleashed...

The deadly, matt black Shredder vessels moved at incredible speed to intercept the Adonins. There was no preamble to a Shredder attack. They did not waste time on flanking tactics or diversions. They attacked the Adonins head-on. The Shredders simply obliterated any Adonins they caught in their sights. It was a strange kind of carnage. It all took place in the tomb like silence of space. Death and destruction everywhere but not a sound, except, perhaps the split second of a thundering of a heartbeat.

Even if a Shredder were capable of emotion you would not expect it to express triumph or pain. It was not their way. For a moment it looked as if the Shredders would contain the Adonin fleet all by themselves, such was the vehemence and ferocity of their suicidal attacks. But for all the Shredders whirlwind forays they were forced back by the sheer mass of the Adonin attack. It seemed that for every Shredder there were at least a thousand Adonins. But at least whenever a solitary Adonin did manage to break through the make-shift Shredder defence they came up against the impregnable wall of the White Fleet.

Far away from the focus of the main battle a tragedy was unfolding for the human defence. On the outskirts of the conflict despite the human endeavour a huge swarm of Adonin ships had overwhelmed one of the Shredder Killer-Class craft. It self-destructed as was the normal Shredder way when faced with a no-win situation. The devastating explosion should have taken every Adonin and those within its radius with it. But one Adonin had miraculously managed to escape unharmed and unscathed as impossible as the odds were. It managed to slip behind the White Fleet who had mistook it for debris and now it could look for a place to land. Luckily for the Adonin it was in a remote enough location not to have been spotted by any low flying craft. It immediately decoded the perimeter defences—they were several hours out of date and then hijacked several human craft. It used them as would-be tugs to any nearby portal.

The portal site itself, when the Adonin craft found it, was neither hidden nor secured. There was no need for camouflage—no alien was ever expected to get that far or even know what a portal or what lay inside it looked like. Besides, you had to have the portal's admission code to get inside. If not, the area was immediately saturated in a carborane super-acid destroying any life form or near life form akin to the Adonin in its vicinity. There was nothing of interest to the aliens on the outside—there was no blood. But on the inside....

The Adonin probed down into the portal's entrance. It felt around for the 'keyhole'. The trouble for any entity seeking ingress was that it was a one time only sort of deal. If the entity got the key/code wrong the portal locked onto the unwelcome intruder blew it to pieces and if that was not enough gave it a thorough acid bath. But the Adonins had adapted. It was something they always did...

The Adonin that had penetrated all of the defences and managed to find the portal had entered the wrong code and was summarily blown to pieces and what was left was dissolved in hissing acid finality. In its place was what appeared to be a cloud of dust. Now the amazingly clever, near impossible, adaption the Adonins had made to their ships, whilst still in combat, came into play. Each spiked, capsule-like ship contained a cargo of billions of minute Adonins, so small that they hovered like a swarm of midges under the immense skies of a summer's day. Every one of them generated a different code. Millions of code entries every millisecond. Now the destroyed Adonin bombarded the portal with keys over and over again until the right code had been entered. Finally, inevitably, one of the minute Adonins gained access. It was the beginning of the end...

So atomically small as the child Adonin was it to its parent it consumed all the blood, every single minute drop, it could find within seconds. There was no limit to the amount of blood an

Adonin could consume. It could feast and feast again ad infinitum. Then it rested a short while... It started to grow fat... It grew fatter... And then as was the Adonins' way it grew so fat it burst and split into two smaller parts—it began reproducing itself. One became two, two became four, four became eight, and so on... exponentially. It kept on reproducing until it had completely filled the human home vessel. It destroyed everything within the home vessel that was not Adonin or was not a component of Adonin. There was now a huge and well prepared fleet of minute Adonins behind the defensive line of the White Fleet and the Shredders in the guise of a human home vessel. A vessel now jam-packed with Adonins waiting to explode like a living, devouring time bomb.

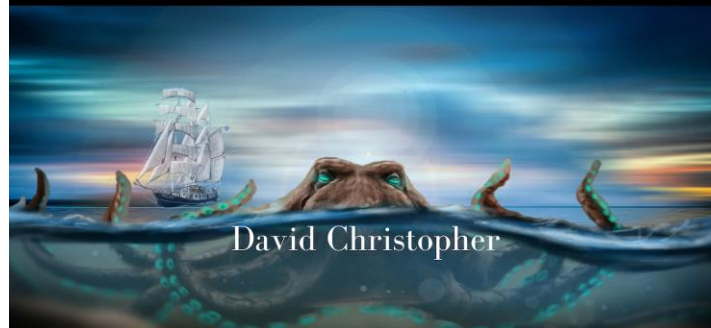
HOURS: 4:00:00

Then the human cell finally did explode. The White Fleet and the Shredders disappeared in one almighty wave. The battle was over and the war was won by the Adonins.

THE END

GONZO PULP PUBLICATIONS
PRESENT

Long John Silver and the Squid-God of Lemuria



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SCHLOCK! GHOST STORIES FOR CHRISTMAS: THE STALLS OF BARCHESTER CATHEDRAL by MR James

This matter began, as far as I am concerned, with the reading of a notice in the obituary section of the Gentleman's Magazine for an early year in the nineteenth century:

On February 26th, at his residence in the Cathedral Close of Barchester, the Venerable John Benwell Haynes, D.D., aged 57, Archdeacon of Sowerbridge and Rector of Pickhill and Candle. He was of——College, Cambridge, and where, by talent and assiduity, he commanded the esteem of his seniors; when, at the usual time, he took his first degree, his name stood high in the list of wranglers. These academical honours procured for him within a short time a Fellowship of his College. In the year 1783 he received Holy Orders, and was shortly afterwards presented to the perpetual Curacy of Ranxton-sub-Ashe by his friend and patron the late truly venerable Bishop of Lichfield.... His speedy preferments, first to a Prebend, and subsequently to the dignity of Precentor in the Cathedral of Barchester, form an eloquent testimony to the respect in which he was held and to his eminent qualifications. He succeeded to the Archdeaconry upon the sudden decease of Archdeacon Pulteney in 1810. His sermons, ever conformable to the principles of the religion and Church which he adorned, displayed in no ordinary degree, without the least trace of enthusiasm, the refinement of the scholar united with the graces of the Christian. Free from sectarian violence, and informed by the spirit of the truest charity, they will long dwell in the memories of his hearers. [Here a further omission.] The productions of his pen include an able defence of Episcopacy, which, though often perused by the author of this tribute to his memory, affords but one additional instance of the want of liberality and enterprise which is a too common characteristic of the publishers of our generation. His published works are, indeed, confined to a spirited and elegant version of the Argonautica of Valerius Flaccus, a volume of Discourses upon the Several Events in the Life of Joshua, delivered in his Cathedral, and a number of the charges which he pronounced at various visitations to the clergy of his Archdeaconry. These are distinguished by etc., etc. The urbanity and hospitality of the subject of these lines will not readily be forgotten by those who enjoyed his acquaintance. His interest in the venerable and awful pile under whose hoary vault he was so punctual an attendant, and particularly in the musical portion of its rites, might be termed filial, and formed a strong and delightful contrast to the polite indifference displayed by too many of our Cathedral dignitaries at the present time.

The final paragraph, after informing us that Dr. Haynes died a bachelor, says:

It might have been augured that an existence so placid and benevolent would have been terminated in a ripe old age by a dissolution equally gradual and calm. But how unsearchable are the workings of Providence! The peaceful and retired seclusion amid which the honoured evening of Dr. Haynes' life was mellowing to its close was destined to be disturbed, nay, shattered, by a tragedy as appalling as it was unexpected. The morning of the 26th of February—

But perhaps I shall do better to keep back the remainder of the narrative until I have told the circumstances which led up to it. These, as far as they are now accessible, I have derived from another source.

I had read the obituary notice which I have been quoting, quite by chance, along with a great many others of the same period. It had excited some little speculation in my mind, but, beyond thinking that, if I ever had an opportunity of examining the local records of the period indicated, I would try to remember Dr. Haynes, I made no effort to pursue his case.

Quite lately I was cataloguing the manuscripts in the library of the college to which he belonged. I had reached the end of the numbered volumes on the shelves, and I proceeded to ask the librarian whether there were any more books which he thought I ought to include in my description. 'I don't think there are,' he said, 'but we had better come and look at the manuscript class and make sure. Have you time to do that now?' I had time. We went to the library, checked off the manuscripts, and, at the end of our survey, arrived at a shelf of which I had seen nothing. Its contents consisted for the most part of sermons, bundles of fragmentary papers, college exercises, Cyrus, an epic poem in several cantos, the product of a country clergyman's leisure, mathematical tracts by a deceased professor, and other similar material of a kind with which I am only too familiar. I took brief notes of these. Lastly, there was a tin box, which was pulled out and dusted. Its label, much faded, was thus inscribed: 'Papers of the Ven. Archdeacon Haynes. Bequeathed in 1834 by his sister, Miss Letitia Haynes.'

I knew at once that the name was one which I had somewhere encountered, and could very soon locate it. 'That must be the Archdeacon Haynes who came to a very odd end at Barchester. I've read his obituary in the Gentleman's Magazine. May I take the box home? Do you know if there is anything interesting in it?'

The librarian was very willing that I should take the box and examine it at leisure. 'I never looked inside it myself,' he said, 'but I've always been meaning to. I am pretty sure that is the box which our old Master once said ought never to have been accepted by the college. He said that to Martin years ago; and he said also that as long as he had control over the library it should never be opened. Martin told me about it, and said that he wanted terribly to know what was in it; but the Master was librarian, and always kept the box in the lodge, so there was no getting at it in his time, and when he died it was taken away by mistake by his heirs, and only returned a few years ago. I can't think why I haven't opened it; but, as I have to go away from Cambridge this afternoon, you had better have first go at it. I think I can trust you not to publish anything undesirable in our catalogue.'

I took the box home and examined its contents, and thereafter consulted the librarian as to what should be done about publication, and, since I have his leave to make a story out of it, provided I disguised the identity of the people concerned, I will try what can be done.

The materials are, of course, mainly journals and letters. How much I shall quote and how much epitomize must be determined by considerations of space. The proper understanding of the situation has necessitated a little—not very arduous—research, which has been greatly facilitated by the excellent illustrations and text of the Barchester volume in Bell's Cathedral Series.

When you enter the choir of Barchester Cathedral now, you pass through a screen of metal and coloured marbles, designed by Sir Gilbert Scott, and find yourself in what I must call a very bare and odiously furnished place. The stalls are modern, without canopies. The places of the dignitaries and the names of the prebends have fortunately been allowed to survive, and are inscribed on small brass plates affixed to the stalls. The organ is in the triforium, and what is seen of the case is Gothic. The reredos and its surroundings are like every other.

Careful engravings of a hundred years ago show a very different state of things. The organ is on a massive classical screen. The stalls are also classical and very massive. There is a baldacchino of wood over the altar, with urns upon its corners. Farther east is a solid altar screen, classical in design, of wood, with a pediment, in which is a triangle surrounded by rays, enclosing certain Hebrew letters in gold. Cherubs contemplate these. There is a pulpit with a great sounding-board at the eastern end of the stalls on the north side, and there is a black and white marble pavement. Two ladies and a gentleman are admiring the general effect. From other sources I gather that the archdeacon's stall then, as now, was next to the bishop's throne at the south-eastern end of the stalls. His house almost faces the west front of the church, and is a fine red-brick building of William the Third's time.

Here Dr. Haynes, already a mature man, took up his abode with his sister in the year 1810. The dignity had long been the object of his wishes, but his predecessor refused to depart until he had attained the age of ninety-two. About a week after he had held a modest festival in celebration of that ninety-second birthday, there came a morning, late in the year, when Dr. Haynes, hurrying cheerfully into his breakfast-room, rubbing his hands and humming a tune, was greeted, and checked in his genial flow of spirits, by the sight of his sister, seated, indeed, in her usual place behind the tea-urn, but bowed forward and sobbing unrestrainedly into her handkerchief. 'What—what is the matter? What bad news?' he began. 'Oh, Johnny, you've not heard? The poor dear archdeacon!' 'The archdeacon, yes? What is it—ill, is he?' 'No, no; they found him on the staircase this morning; it is so shocking.' 'Is it possible! Dear, dear, poor Pulteney! Had there been any seizure?' 'They don't think so, and that is almost the worst thing about it. It seems to have been all the fault of that stupid maid of theirs, Jane.' Dr. Haynes paused. 'I don't quite understand, Letitia. How was the maid at fault?' 'Why, as far as I can make out, there was a stair-rod missing, and she never mentioned it, and the poor archdeacon set his foot quite on the edge of the step—you know how slippery that oak is—and it seems he must have fallen almost the whole flight and broken his neck. It is so sad for poor Miss Pulteney. Of course, they will get rid of the girl at once. I never liked her.' Miss Haynes's grief resumed its sway, but eventually relaxed so far as to permit of her taking some breakfast. Not so her brother, who, after standing in silence before the window for some minutes, left the room, and did not appear again that morning.

I need only add that the careless maid-servant was dismissed forthwith, but that the missing stair-rod was very shortly afterwards found under the stair-carpet—an additional proof, if any were needed, of extreme stupidity and carelessness on her part.

For a good many years Dr. Haynes had been marked out by his ability, which seems to have been really considerable, as the likely successor of Archdeacon Pulteney, and no disappointment was

in store for him. He was duly installed, and entered with zeal upon the discharge of those functions which are appropriate to one in his position. A considerable space in his journals is occupied with exclamations upon the confusion in which Archdeacon Pulteney had left the business of his office and the documents appertaining to it. Dues upon Wringham and Barnswood have been uncollected for something like twelve years, and are largely irrecoverable; no visitation has been held for seven years; four chancels are almost past mending. The persons deputized by the archdeacon have been nearly as incapable as himself. It was almost a matter for thankfulness that this state of things had not been permitted to continue, and a letter from a friend confirms this view. '[Greek: ho katechôn],’ it says (in rather cruel allusion to the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians), ‘is removed at last. My poor friend! Upon what a scene of confusion will you be entering! I give you my word that, on the last occasion of my crossing his threshold, there was no single paper that he could lay hands upon, no syllable of mine that he could hear, and no fact in connexion with my business that he could remember. But now, thanks to a negligent maid and a loose stair-carpet, there is some prospect that necessary business will be transacted without a complete loss alike of voice and temper.’ This letter was tucked into a pocket in the cover of one of the diaries.

There can be no doubt of the new archdeacon’s zeal and enthusiasm. ‘Give me but time to reduce to some semblance of order the innumerable errors and complications with which I am confronted, and I shall gladly and sincerely join with the aged Israelite in the canticle which too many, I fear, pronounce but with their lips.’ This reflection I find, not in a diary, but a letter; the doctor’s friends seem to have returned his correspondence to his surviving sister. He does not confine himself, however, to reflections. His investigation of the rights and duties of his office are very searching and business-like, and there is a calculation in one place that a period of three years will just suffice to set the business of the Archdeaconry upon a proper footing. The estimate appears to have been an exact one. For just three years he is occupied in reforms; but I look in vain at the end of that time for the promised *Nunc dimittis*. He has now found a new sphere of activity. Hitherto his duties have precluded him from more than an occasional attendance at the Cathedral services. Now he begins to take an interest in the fabric and the music. Upon his struggles with the organist, an old gentleman who had been in office since 1786, I have no time to dwell; they were not attended with any marked success. More to the purpose is his sudden growth of enthusiasm for the Cathedral itself and its furniture. There is a draft of a letter to Sylvanus Urban (which I do not think was ever sent) describing the stalls in the choir. As I have said, these were of fairly late date—of about the year 1700, in fact.

‘The archdeacon’s stall, situated at the south-east end, west of the episcopal throne (now so worthily occupied by the truly excellent prelate who adorns the See of Barchester), is distinguished by some curious ornamentation. In addition to the arms of Dean West, by whose efforts the whole of the internal furniture of the choir was completed, the prayer-desk is terminated at the eastern extremity by three small but remarkable statuettes in the grotesque manner. One is an exquisitely modelled figure of a cat, whose crouching posture suggests with admirable spirit the suppleness, vigilance, and craft of the redoubted adversary of the genus *Mus*. Opposite to this is a figure seated upon a throne and invested with the attributes of royalty; but it is no earthly monarch whom the carver has sought to portray. His feet are studiously concealed by the long robe in which he is draped: but neither the crown nor the cap which he wears suffice to hide the prick-ears and curving horns which betray his Tartarean origin; and the hand which

rests upon his knee, is armed with talons of horrifying length and sharpness. Between these two figures stands a shape muffled in a long mantle. This might at first sight be mistaken for a monk or 'friar of orders grey', for the head is cowed and a knotted cord depends from somewhere about the waist. A slight inspection, however, will lead to a very different conclusion. The knotted cord is quickly seen to be a halter, held by a hand all but concealed within the draperies; while the sunken features and, horrid to relate, the rent flesh upon the cheek-bones, proclaim the King of Terrors. These figures are evidently the production of no unskilled chisel; and should it chance that any of your correspondents are able to throw light upon their origin and significance, my obligations to your valuable miscellany will be largely increased.'

There is more description in the paper, and, seeing that the woodwork in question has now disappeared, it has a considerable interest. A paragraph at the end is worth quoting:

Some late researches among the Chapter accounts have shown me that the carving of the stalls was not as was very usually reported, the work of Dutch artists, but was executed by a native of this city or district named Austin. The timber was procured from an oak copse in the vicinity, the property of the Dean and Chapter, known as Holywood. Upon a recent visit to the parish within whose boundaries it is situated, I learned from the aged and truly respectable incumbent that traditions still lingered amongst the inhabitants of the great size and age of the oaks employed to furnish the materials of the stately structure which has been, however imperfectly, described in the above lines. Of one in particular, which stood near the centre of the grove, it is remembered that it was known as the Hanging Oak. The propriety of that title is confirmed by the fact that a quantity of human bones was found in the soil about its roots, and that at certain times of the year it was the custom for those who wished to secure a successful issue to their affairs, whether of love or the ordinary business of life, to suspend from its boughs small images or puppets rudely fashioned of straw, twigs, or the like rustic materials.

So much for the archdeacon's archaeological investigations. To return to his career as it is to be gathered from his diaries. Those of his first three years of hard and careful work show him throughout in high spirits, and, doubtless, during this time, that reputation for hospitality and urbanity which is mentioned in his obituary notice was well deserved. After that, as time goes on, I see a shadow coming over him—destined to develop into utter blackness—which I cannot but think must have been reflected in his outward demeanour. He commits a good deal of his fears and troubles to his diary; there was no other outlet for them. He was unmarried and his sister was not always with him. But I am much mistaken if he has told all that he might have told. A series of extracts shall be given:

Aug. 30th 1816—The days begin to draw in more perceptibly than ever. Now that the Archdeaconry papers are reduced to order, I must find some further employment for the evening hours of autumn and winter. It is a great blow that Letitia's health will not allow her to stay through these months. Why not go on with my Defence of Episcopacy? It may be useful.

Sept. 15.—Letitia has left me for Brighton.

Oct. 11.—Candles lit in the choir for the first time at evening prayers. It came as a shock: I find that I absolutely shrink from the dark season.

Nov. 17—Much struck by the character of the carving on my desk: I do not know that I had ever carefully noticed it before. My attention was called to it by an accident. During the Magnificat I was, I regret to say, almost overcome with sleep. My hand was resting on the back of the carved figure of a cat which is the nearest to me of the three figures on the end of my stall. I was not aware of this, for I was not looking in that direction, until I was startled by what seemed a softness, a feeling as of rather rough and coarse fur, and a sudden movement, as if the creature were twisting round its head to bite me. I regained complete consciousness in an instant, and I have some idea that I must have uttered a suppressed exclamation, for I noticed that Mr. Treasurer turned his head quickly in my direction. The impression of the unpleasant feeling was so strong that I found myself rubbing my hand upon my surplice. This accident led me to examine the figures after prayers more carefully than I had done before, and I realized for the first time with what skill they are executed.

Dec. 6—I do indeed miss Letitia's company. The evenings, after I have worked as long as I can at my Defence, are very trying. The house is too large for a lonely man, and visitors of any kind are too rare. I get an uncomfortable impression when going to my room that there is company of some kind. The fact is (I may as well formulate it to myself) that I hear voices. This, I am well aware, is a common symptom of incipient decay of the brain—and I believe that I should be less disquieted than I am if I had any suspicion that this was the cause. I have none—none whatever, nor is there anything in my family history to give colour to such an idea. Work, diligent work, and a punctual attention to the duties which fall to me is my best remedy, and I have little doubt that it will prove efficacious.

Jan. 1—My trouble is, I must confess it, increasing upon me. Last night, upon my return after midnight from the Deanery, I lit my candle to go upstairs. I was nearly at the top when something whispered to me, 'Let me wish you a happy New Year.' I could not be mistaken: it spoke distinctly and with a peculiar emphasis. Had I dropped my candle, as I all but did, I tremble to think what the consequences must have been. As it was, I managed to get up the last flight, and was quickly in my room with the door locked, and experienced no other disturbance.

Jan. 15—I had occasion to come downstairs last night to my workroom for my watch, which I had inadvertently left on my table when I went up to bed. I think I was at the top of the last flight when I had a sudden impression of a sharp whisper in my ear 'Take care.' I clutched the balusters and naturally looked round at once. Of course, there was nothing. After a moment I went on—it was no good turning back—but I had as nearly as possible fallen: a cat—a large one by the feel of it—slipped between my feet, but again, of course, I saw nothing. It may have been

the kitchen cat, but I do not think it was.

Feb. 27—A curious thing last night, which I should like to forget. Perhaps if I put it down here I may see it in its true proportion. I worked in the library from about 9 to 10. The hall and staircase seemed to be unusually full of what I can only call movement without sound: by this I mean that there seemed to be continuous going and coming, and that whenever I ceased writing to listen, or looked out into the hall, the stillness was absolutely unbroken. Nor, in going to my room at an earlier hour than usual—about half-past ten—was I conscious of anything that I could call a noise. It so happened that I had told John to come to my room for the letter to the bishop which I wished to have delivered early in the morning at the Palace. He was to sit up, therefore, and come for it when he heard me retire. This I had for the moment forgotten, though I had remembered to carry the letter with me to my room. But when, as I was winding up my watch, I heard a light tap at the door, and a low voice saying, ‘May I come in?’ (which I most undoubtedly did hear), I recollected the fact, and took up the letter from my dressing-table, saying ‘Certainly: come in.’ No one, however, answered my summons, and it was now that, as I strongly suspect, I committed an error: for I opened the door and held the letter out. There was certainly no one at that moment in the passage, but, in the instant of my standing there, the door at the end opened and John appeared carrying a candle. I asked him whether he had come to the door earlier; but am satisfied that he had not. I do not like the situation; but although my senses were very much on the alert, and though it was some time before I could sleep, I must allow that I perceived nothing further of an untoward character.

With the return of spring, when his sister came to live with him for some months, Dr. Haynes’s entries become more cheerful, and, indeed, no symptom of depression is discernible until the early part of September when he was again left alone. And now, indeed, there is evidence that he was incommoded again, and that more pressingly. To this matter I will return in a moment, but I digress to put in a document which, rightly or wrongly, I believe to have a bearing on the thread of the story.

The account-books of Dr. Haynes, preserved along with his other papers, show, from a date but little later than that of his institution as archdeacon, a quarterly payment of £25 to J. L. Nothing could have been made of this, had it stood by itself. But I connect with it a very dirty and ill-written letter, which, like another that I have quoted, was in a pocket in the cover of a diary. Of date or postmark there is no vestige, and the decipherment was not easy. It appears to run:

Dr. Sr.

I have bin expctin to her off you theis last wicks, and not Haveing done so must supose you have not got mine witch was saying how me and my man had met in with bad times this season all seems to go cross with us on the farm and which way to look for the rent we have no knowledge of it this been the sad case with us if you would have the great [liberality probably, but the exact spelling defies reproduction] to send fourty pounds otherwise steps will have to be took which I

should not wish. Has you was the Means of me losing my place with Dr. Pulteney I think it is only just what I am asking and you know best what I could say if I was Put to it but I do not wish anything of that unpleasant Nature being one that always wish to have everything Pleasant about me.

Your obedt Servt,

Jane Lee.

About the time at which I suppose this letter to have been written there is, in fact, a payment of £40 to J.L.

We return to the diary:

Oct. 22—At evening prayers, during the Psalms, I had that same experience which I recollect from last year. I was resting my hand on one of the carved figures, as before (I usually avoid that of the cat now), and—I was going to have said—a change came over it, but that seems attributing too much importance to what must, after all, be due to some physical affection in myself: at any rate, the wood seemed to become chilly and soft as if made of wet linen. I can assign the moment at which I became sensible of this. The choir were singing the words (Set thou an ungodly man to be ruler over him and let Satan stand at his right hand.)

The whispering in my house was more persistent tonight. I seemed not to be rid of it in my room. I have not noticed this before. A nervous man, which I am not, and hope I am not becoming, would have been much annoyed, if not alarmed, by it. The cat was on the stairs tonight. I think it sits there always. There is no kitchen cat.

Nov. 15—Here again I must note a matter I do not understand. I am much troubled in sleep. No definite image presented itself, but I was pursued by the very vivid impression that wet lips were whispering into my ear with great rapidity and emphasis for some time together. After this, I suppose, I fell asleep, but was awakened with a start by a feeling as if a hand were laid on my shoulder. To my intense alarm I found myself standing at the top of the lowest flight of the first staircase. The moon was shining brightly enough through the large window to let me see that there was a large cat on the second or third step. I can make no comment. I crept up to bed again, I do not know how. Yes, mine is a heavy burden. [Then follows a line or two which has been scratched out. I fancy I read something like ‘acted for the best’.]

Not long after this it is evident to me that the archdeacon’s firmness began to give way under the pressure of these phenomena. I omit as unnecessarily painful and distressing the ejaculations and prayers which, in the months of December and January, appear for the first time and become

increasingly frequent. Throughout this time, however, he is obstinate in clinging to his post. Why he did not plead ill-health and take refuge at Bath or Brighton I cannot tell; my impression is that it would have done him no good; that he was a man who, if he had confessed himself beaten by the annoyances, would have succumbed at once, and that he was conscious of this. He did seek to palliate them by inviting visitors to his house. The result he has noted in this fashion:

Jan. 7—I have prevailed on my cousin Allen to give me a few days, and he is to occupy the chamber next to mine.

Jan. 8—A still night. Allen slept well, but complained of the wind. My own experiences were as before: still whispering and whispering: what is it that he wants to say?

Jan. 9—Allen thinks this a very noisy house. He thinks, too, that my cat is an unusually large and fine specimen, but very wild.

Jan. 10—Allen and I in the library until 11. He left me twice to see what the maids were doing in the hall: returning the second time he told me he had seen one of them passing through the door at the end of the passage, and said if his wife were here she would soon get them into better order. I asked him what coloured dress the maid wore; he said grey or white. I supposed it would be so.

Jan. 11—Allen left me today. I must be firm.

These words, I must be firm, occur again and again on subsequent days; sometimes they are the only entry. In these cases they are in an unusually large hand, and dug into the paper in a way which must have broken the pen that wrote them.

Apparently the archdeacon's friends did not remark any change in his behaviour, and this gives me a high idea of his courage and determination. The diary tells us nothing more than I have indicated of the last days of his life. The end of it all must be told in the polished language of the obituary notice:

The morning of the 26th of February was cold and tempestuous. At an early hour the servants had occasion to go into the front hall of the residence occupied by the lamented subject of these lines. What was their horror upon observing the form of their beloved and respected master lying upon the landing of the principal staircase in an attitude which inspired the gravest fears. Assistance was procured, and an universal consternation was experienced upon the discovery that he had been the object of a brutal and a murderous attack. The vertebral column was fractured in more than one place. This might have been the result of a fall: it appeared that the

stair-carpet was loosened at one point. But, in addition to this, there were injuries inflicted upon the eyes, nose and mouth, as if by the agency of some savage animal, which, dreadful to relate, rendered those features unrecognizable. The vital spark was, it is needless to add, completely extinct, and had been so, upon the testimony of respectable medical authorities, for several hours. The author or authors of this mysterious outrage are alike buried in mystery, and the most active conjecture has hitherto failed to suggest a solution of the melancholy problem afforded by this appalling occurrence.

The writer goes on to reflect upon the probability that the writings of Mr. Shelley, Lord Byron, and M. Voltaire may have been instrumental in bringing about the disaster, and concludes by hoping, somewhat vaguely, that this event may 'operate as an example to the rising generation'; but this portion of his remarks need not be quoted in full.

I had already formed the conclusion that Dr. Haynes was responsible for the death of Dr. Pulteney. But the incident connected with the carved figure of death upon the archdeacon's stall was a very perplexing feature. The conjecture that it had been cut out of the wood of the Hanging Oak was not difficult, but seemed impossible to substantiate. However, I paid a visit to Barchester, partly with the view of finding out whether there were any relics of the woodwork to be heard of. I was introduced by one of the canons to the curator of the local museum, who was, my friend said, more likely to be able to give me information on the point than anyone else. I told this gentleman of the description of certain carved figures and arms formerly on the stalls, and asked whether any had survived. He was able to show me the arms of Dean West and some other fragments. These, he said, had been got from an old resident, who had also once owned a figure—perhaps one of those which I was inquiring for. There was a very odd thing about that figure, he said. 'The old man who had it told me that he picked it up in a woodyard, whence he had obtained the still extant pieces, and had taken it home for his children. On the way home he was fiddling about with it and it came in two in his hands, and a bit of paper dropped out. This he picked up and, just noticing that there was writing on it, put it into his pocket, and subsequently into a vase on his mantelpiece. I was at his house not very long ago, and happened to pick up the vase and turn it over to see whether there were any marks on it, and the paper fell into my hand. The old man, on my handing it to him, told me the story I have told you, and said I might keep the paper. It was crumpled and rather torn, so I have mounted it on a card, which I have here. If you can tell me what it means I shall be very glad, and also, I may say, a good deal surprised.'

He gave me the card. The paper was quite legibly inscribed in an old hand, and this is what was on it:

When I grew in the Wood I was water'd w'th Blood Now in the Church I stand Who that touches me with his Hand If a Bloody hand he bear I counsell him to be ware Lest he be fetcht away Whether by night or day, But chiefly when the wind blows high In a night of February. This I drempt, 26 Febr. Anno 1699. JOHN AUSTIN.

'I suppose it is a charm or a spell: wouldn't you call it something of that kind?' said the curator.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I suppose one might. What became of the figure in which it was concealed?’

‘Oh, I forgot,’ said he. ‘The old man told me it was so ugly and frightened his children so much that he burnt it.’

THE END

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REVIEW by John C Adams

As an Advanced Reviewer for Crystal Lake Publishing, I'm used to having fiction drop into my inbox, but this was the first time I'd seen a 'how to' manual from them.

'It's Alive' is devoted to the craft of writing, developing and polishing great horror fiction. Perhaps you've wondered as a reader how your favourite authors hit the nail on the head time after time, making it look effortless when all the while you understand perfectly that it really isn't. Maybe as a writer with great support behind you already, you're looking for fresh sources of advice to keep developing. I fall into both these categories and I found this book immensely helpful.

My first thought about any 'how to manual' (and not just in writing, I did this when finding a washing machine manual too) is 'Do these guys really know their stuff?' In a world where more or less anyone can post a blog or video online and portray themselves as an instant expert (and in the case of washing-machine maintenance, boy is that true!), any fledgling or developing writer is going to want to know that the authors have a proven track record in publishing before clicking 'add to cart'.

There's no substitute for actual success in the form of book sales, contracts, marketing experience and editing assignments. This is where some 'self-help' books start to look a little thin, and some claims about sales might appear a trifle unverified. So it's good to know that 'It's Alive' contains articles, interviews and essays from writers like Clive Barker and Ramsey Campbell, Yvonne Navarro and Joe Lansdale (writing a joint article here with Kasey Lansdale).

'It's Alive' is full of practical examples rather than bland statements that anyone could have written and aren't concrete enough or well developed enough in their examples for you to put into practice or just don't connect with the author's actual lived experience with their own work? This sets 'It's Alive' pleasantly apart from any awful lot of other writing manuals out there. Just take Todd Keisling's essay on 'Exploring the Roots of the Horror Story', or Elizabeth Massie's analysis of 'Creating Effective Dialogue in Horror Stories' for a start.

What I liked most about this book was how precise the advice was, how fact-laden and how much value-added analysis was included too. There's a critique of Nathaniel Hawthorne's unveiling of theme via plot in *The Birthmark* provided by Stephanie M Wytovich, which really gets down into it. And 'Writing for the Themed Anthology' by Lisa Morton, which I loved because an awful lot of work out there is in precisely this environment.

And who doesn't want to delve inside the Horror Writer's Toolbox, in the company of Tim Waggoner?

There were so many confident and experienced voices here, whose writing I admire greatly, that I truly did feel like I was benefiting from the wisdom of crowds!

Enjoy!

THE END



Available from [Amazon](#).

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A VAMPIRE AND A NECROPHILE WALK INTO A CAR CRASH by Rob Bliss

Chapter 4: An Eden

There is a tropical island nation that shall, heretofore, remain nameless, though it has had several names in its long conquered history.

First called Xoathculapappetu by the people who originally arrived on its shores by canoe. Translated roughly: “Shit! This ain’t the place!” The canoe had been buffeted off course by tides and trade winds and a mischievous dolphin.

Other people arrived in canoes, killed and/or enslaved and/or impregnated the first people, and called the island “Shupshupmookamooka”. Translated: “Damn, there sure is some sweet naked pussy on this one!” These new conquerors were all male and had been banished from their island for raping very old women, dogs, sheep, and shepherds.

They ruled democratically, oddly enough. Had a rudimentary writing system, had no name for “God”, created several versions of the zero, and invented the telescope from volcanic glass 1500 years before Galileo. But then one of their kids broke the damn thing and they killed the kid and his dad, who had invented it and had the only blueprints. In his head. Cutting off his head did not reveal the design. No one beyond the island knew about the invention of the telescope because ... they were on an island.

(Little known fact: many inventions and philosophies had been invented long before history said they had been. Just a few examples: a Maori tribesman in New Zealand invented gunpowder ... but the inventor blew himself up; Freudian and Jungian psychoanalyses were invented by two lonely fishermen from Chile who needed new ways to blame each other for the lack of fish ... with one insulting the other by calling him “such an archetype—not even a real man!”, and the other by telling his fellow angler to “go fuck your mother!”; a crude thermo-nuclear reactor was invented in the barren wilds of Canada, but I’m sure you can figure out what happened to that guy ... hint: he originally thought it was a child’s toy; the compass was originally constructed by a ten-year-old girl in Swaziland, but girls were less valuable than cattle, so her genius was immediately dismissed by both of her parents, and her loadstone thrown into a lake and eaten by a crocodile; the bazooka was invented by a nomad in the Sinai desert, but he used it mostly to shoot stuff at his harem of wives, until most of them died, then the fun wore off and the desert sands buried the abandoned toy; the steam engine was invented by an ancient Greek, but not the one you’re thinking of—his younger brother, Shecky, who built it, but then his asshole brother stole it and claimed it as his own, but luckily the world didn’t pay any attention to the genius idea until the nineteenth century when someone else stole it from the older brother; and both theories of relativity, plus a Grand Unified Field Theory, were invented by Emily Bronte, but she cut them all out of *Wuthering Heights* because they had nothing to do with the plot.)

Anyway, back to the island.

Over the centuries, it was invaded by the Chinese, the Aleutian Inuit, the Vikings, the Saracens, the warrior ship-building empire of Australian Aborigines, the Portuguese, the Spanish, the

French, the English, the French again, the Dutch, the Germans, the English again, and finally, the Americans.

Then, in the mid-twentieth century, it was given its independence because the Americans had detonated an undersea nuke really close to it, and didn't want it anymore. They kept the secret to themselves, said that the loud rumbling and huge tidal wave was from an earthquake.

Naturally, by that point, none of the original inhabitants were left. So whoever was left last became the indigenous peoples. There was one old lady who still bore a Spanish surname, but she died before independence, so the oldest influence became French. Many of the streets bore French names, but no one spoke the language anymore, and only a few words in the island's patois were bastardizations of German and Dutch words. For example, the German word "yah" for "yes" became "yes". And no one suspected that a "yah" had ever been on the tongue.

Now, in the Twenty-First Century, things had settled down and the radiation waned to acceptable levels. All the conquering was done through product placement and brand recognition. You are what you own. You are what TV shows you watch, what search engine you use, the type of cell phone you chose, what your Facebook favourites are, and whom you have friended and unfriended. Cyber colonialism was the new thing, but it happened to every nation with little bloodshed and few people feeling that they had been conquered.

Feeling and being are two different things. Sometimes this is true in a court of law: "I felt like killing that guy, but I didn't, so I'm not a killer." This confession of emotion doesn't get you thrown in jail for murder. (Although, "I was pissed off and wanted to blow up a piece of my nation, that's why I was on that terrorist website, but I didn't blow anything up," does get you thrown in jail for being a terrorist.) In a court of religious law, however, feeling is being. "I felt like I wanted to fuck that chick who isn't my wife, but I didn't," does make you an adulterer, and you do go to religious jail and you are sodomized by men who are not your husband.

What does this have to do with the island? Like most islands with no natural resources or valuable exports, they relied on tourism to not sink. This island realized that early in its history, and went crazy with the idea. Laws were created around tourism, as opposed to around religious laws.

The entire nation became a resort. Religions were tolerated, but not allowed to influence politics or law. They had to pay taxes, since religion was declared both a belief system and a business. First time religion had been classified as such anywhere in the world. The tiny nation would create many firsts. Having to pay taxes made many religions leave the island. But people still needed to believe in something greater than themselves, so they created their own religions. In their basements. Cults, basically. Giving themselves reasons to dress in funny clothes and say funny things and laugh and be laughed at and to smoke a lot of ganja.

Another first: soft drugs were legalized. This, more than the white beaches, the cobalt waters, and the year-round warm weather was a great attraction for tourists. The GNP sky-rocketed.

And another first: nudism was mandatory.

That's right: the nation was the largest nudist, pot-smoking resort in the world. With no special fees except the price of a plane ticket to enter from your world into theirs.

Crowds flocked, clogged the beaches, the dance clubs, the restaurants, the communal bathrooms. Many Fortune 500 companies set up exclusive branches in the nation. Their employees who wanted to be transferred to the new branch had to win a lottery, understanding full well where they were going and what would be expected of them upon emigration to the branch office. Winning the re-location lottery was like a promotion. Winners would even agree to a pay cut to be the Chosen One. To attract further business, the nation declared itself a tax haven. They were doing everything right, much to the envy and hatred of other open-minded democratic nations who believed in the freedom of the individual. No nation liked one-upmanship.

At last there existed on this worn-out, tortured globe a country as close as one could get to heaven on earth.

Even the skittish and shy soon left their prudery at the airport. Monogamy was a dirty word. Polygamy and polyamory were legalized. "Marry fifty people of all kinds of genders and sexual orientations and fetishes—who cares? You're all already fucking each other, so if you can afford all those rings, then tie those knots!" read one introductory pamphlet given out at the airport and embassies. Just so everyone knew how many laws they were free of upon landing in the New Eden.

Hearts were broken, but many new loves bloomed. Same thing happened in the rest of the world, but in this nation if your heart was broken, you could at least drown your sorrows in alcohol, drugs and Sado-Masochistic orgies.

Holland-esque "coffee" shops were everywhere, as were shops selling goods and services to every known sexual fetish. Statues of immense penises and gaping vaginas and towering breasts and global buttocks, as well as tableaux of people fucking people, animals and inanimate objects were everywhere. Erotica novels sold in the millions (here was one nation where the writer could actually become rich and famous and never been known outside the country; the current writer will soon emigrate). Hundreds of porn movies were shot daily, most of them involving a guy with a camera asking people on the beach if he could film them doing what they were doing anyway. More hotel room satellite channels carried twenty-four hour porn than those which only carried news, weather, sports, and violent, graphic, seriously-disturbing (how can this be legal, especially at the dinner hour?) cop shows. No one wanted to hear about disaster in the rest of the world when they were visiting paradise. The disaster could wait—they'd get back to it.

There was no crime. Every motel, hotel, resort and campsite had massive vaults for valuables. If anyone tried to steal, they were naked—no pockets. If someone wanted to try rape, there were groups and clubs for that fantasy—to give or to receive, men and women both. If someone wanted to bring on the hate and pick a fight ... again, they were naked. The male scrotum is very visible and even more defenceless without pants. The winner could promptly get back to his orgy already in progress. But when physically naked, one's dark demons were also exposed, and thus, lessened. There were so many more fun things to do than fighting. Like fucking. Although, if one

wanted to demonstrate his or her dominance, one merely walked into a certain club, took up the whip, and lashed the back of the poor soul who got there first and was happily strapped to the St. Andrew's cross.

Fun had by all.

That's why Spanky the Gay Vampire decided to make the trip. A little break from the usual vampirism and sodomy. (He never knew when one of his victims wasn't so inclined to him, and the bulge in his prey's pocket turned out to be a stake). He wanted to rest and recuperate and just enjoy all his delicious perversions—maybe learn a few more.

He brought his tux and cape and jewellery, but didn't plan on wearing it all too much, unless he found a party where his outfit would be a smash.

And he would openly call himself 'Spanky', knowing that was a great key to throwing wide many wonderfully darkened doorways.

Along with his outer skin, his only accessory was a single cob of Native American multi-coloured corn. He and Percy the Necrophiliac were best buds now, after realizing they each accomplished their goals best together instead of alone. Their separate desires did not conflict—actually accentuated and assisted each other—therefore, they each relented their disgust and/or hatred and became solid friends.

They split the airfare and motel, planned to stay a week. Once in their room, Spanky took a painting of satyrs and other assorted Greek gods and livestock raping men, women and boys—and being raped in return—off the wall above the bed and hung the corn cob up on the nail.

Percy hatched from a kernel of corn that fell like a mint on the pillow.

“That's the first time I've actually seen you do that,” Spanky commented.

Percy raised his machete, naked, penis already half-erect in enthusiastic expectation, finally having arrived after being stuck in the airplane's cargo hold for so long, and said, “Ta-da!”

Hands on hips, still dressed, Spanky looked at Percy standing on the bed.

Percy lowered his machete and penis. “Stop staring at my dick.”

“Sorry.”

Spanky went into the bathroom to change (Old World shyness still ruling the day, until New World exhibitionism prevailed) as Percy flung open the drapes and admired the view.

Blood flowed out of his face and into his genitals. The penis rose again, never to be kept down for long. Especially with the room's air conditioner blowing against his pubes.

“Wow,” he whispered to the window. “Wow ... wow ... wow ...”

Much flesh walked passed the window. Some beautiful, some not so much, but all of it happy. Many of the naked bodies waved at him and smiled.

“Y’think the machete will freak people out?” he called, but Spanky didn’t hear beyond the running shower water. “Maybe the machete will freak people out,” he nodded to himself.

He threw it on the bed, felt a slight sorrow at having to abandon his old faithful companion for the sake of his libido. His penis and his blade always did everything together. One gave rise to the other and vice versa.

He looked back at all that walking, highly-sexualized meat, and began sweating, though the air conditioned breeze blew up the height of his torso.

He faced a dilemma. Nowhere else in the world had he come across such sexual openness and depravity. It was terrifying. He needed oppression and unwillingness. He needed the dead, the terrified, the screaming co-ed, the machismo jock, the creaking floorboards and squeaking doors. But all the people walking passed were happily alive. They engaged in every known fetish, but there was always one that no one wanted to be a part of. Percy’s fetish. Necrophilia.

Spanky exited the bathroom, hair wet and slicked back with deep comb lines, wearing nothing but his fangs. His smile beamed.

“I’m ready for love!” he announced. Saw the machete on the bed. “Not bringing the sword of Damocles?”

Percy looked at the battered blade and reflected sadly on his lot in life. And tried to keep his eyes off the manatee hanging down to the vampire’s knees.

“No. I never thought, but who’s gonna want to get killed here? They’re all so happy.”

Spanky’s smile straightened. “Oh.” Glanced from the bed to the downfall of the necrophiliac’s gaze. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Shit. Sorry, buddy.”

“They got no crime here. This might sound weird, but I don’t wanna make myself a pariah and start the first crime spree.”

He sat down on the edge of the bed, took the machete, laid it across his knees, scratched a fingernail against the steel.

Spanky sat down next to him, but not too close, tapped piano fingers on his knees, picked a towel thread off the purple head off the wrinkled skin of his penis.

“Damn,” whispered the vampire. “I thought this would be a great place for both of us.” Percy nodded, stared down at the blade. Spanky puffed air into his cheeks, looked in the mirror beside

the TV, saw nothing but a sad Percy. “Y’think you could maybe try to fuck a live person?”

Percy shrugged. “I dunno. It’s not the same. I mean, I’ve done it. But, you know I’ve got a lot of fucked up psychological problems—to put it mildly.” He glanced at Spanky and chuckled, then turned his sorrowful stare back to his knees. “Just not the same. I need the dead. That glassy death stare, the colour change in their skin, the smell ... really gets me going.”

“Well, they cater to every fetish ... so the brochure said. Maybe they got a group who likes to role-play death?”

Percy shook his head. “I can always see the breathing ... ruins the illusion. Tried that too. And their body doesn’t slowly go cold. And ... not to be too gross about it ... but dead people shit themselves. Don’t get me wrong—I’m not into scat—there was that Queen Whatsherface—I’m not that weird. But I can smell it—it’s part of the death smell. It all has to come together for me to get off. Otherwise I get a limp dick. Which pisses me off even more.”

“Then you’re not having a good time,” Spanky consoled. “Which means I kinda won’t have a good time.”

Percy looked into Spanky’s eyes. “Thanks, buddy. I don’t want to spoil it for you.”

Spanky lifted his eyebrows and smirked. “Well, no offense, but I’ll probably still have some fun. People like being bitten while fucking. And when I draw blood, they like the kinkiness even more. They don’t realize they’ve been turned into the undead ‘cause they’re so turned on.”

Percy nodded, chin sagging to his chest. “Yeah, you got a good thing going. Lucky bastard.”

They shallowly smiled at each other. Spanky chanced a platonic pat on Percy’s bare back, didn’t let his palm linger too long. Friends with benefits they were not, nor would ever be. Even if they could fuck each other, their friendship was worth more than a quick, unsatisfying roll in the hay. And sex always spoiled a friendship.

“Why don’t we both start off slow?” Spanky suggested, standing up, spinning the room key around his pinkie finger. “We just go outside, get some booze in us, buy some pot—relax. See other people fuck ... and just watch the waves roll in. We’re on vacation for a week, and I’m not letting you stay in here the whole time.”

Percy appreciated the pep talk. Glanced back once at the machete, then followed Spanky outside.

It was paradise. Men and women of all shapes and sizes and colours fucked men and women of different shapes and sizes and colours. The world was Eden—an ongoing orgy without either shame or consequence, way better than the one written about in the guilt-ridden Bible. Condoms were distributed freely in ubiquitous fishbowls. Free clinics—paid for by the government—took care of most accidental diseases. Still, if one obtained a life-threatening illness, one didn’t mind too much because they enjoyed how they got it. The human libido was a powerful brainwashing force.

Those with lethal or non-lethal diseases of a sexual nature often came back to the island where they could join groups of like-infected people. They fucked themselves to death. Better to catch death while suntanning in paradise than while grovelling in a hellish alley; better to die by sexual ecstasy than by slow decline in a nursing home, too old to shit when one wanted to as opposed to when the body rebelled.

A possible choice (but not really) for Percy. How long would the disease remain virulent in the corpse? He just wanted to fuck the dead, not die doing so.

While he and Spanky strolled around the pool's edge—Spanky checking out and being checked out by men and women (he ignored the girls, wished he had a tattoo on his chest reading "Cock only!"), Percy stared at an old man who was skin and bones, lying on a lounge, asleep.

In his seventies, not a day less. Shaved body hair including pubic, head tilted back, mouth open like a black chasm, snoring. Still alive. Spending his golden years in heaven. Doubtful that his penis still worked, but a man can look. The eyes of all human beings fucked more than their genitalia ever could.

Spanky wandered ahead, chatting with a group of gay bears, telling them openly that he was a gay vampire, which excited them and got things rolling quickly. They pulled him into their thick-arm circle, rubbed his back, admired the length and girth of his non-trouser snake. Two of them got on their knees in full daylight—to Spanky's amazement, forgetting where he was for a moment—and used their mouths and hands to rear up his Sasquatch.

Percy ignored Spanky. Guys could do that. A guy picks up a girl (or guy) in a bar and says he's leaving. His male friends high-five him and send him on his way. A girl leaves with a guy and she's a whore who is abandoning her female friends. Girl power betrayed. They will unfriend her on the internet when they get home. The worse form of shunning.

Instead, Percy stared at the sleeping man. Wondered: if he dies, can I fuck him? The necrophiliac was largely straight, but he'd go gay if pickings were slim. Was that his only chance at sexual gratification? Fuck the recently demised and elderly? Give them (and himself) one last thrill before it was all over? Was his libido in paradise relegated to GILFs? Goddamn—that was unfair!

Couldn't stand looking into the oral abyss of grandpa's mouth anymore, so he walked on. Wished he had pockets to jam his fists into as he strolled with sad eyes on the ground. Men and women stopped him to chat and start the dance of seduction, but he said "No thanks" and walked on.

Spanky was long gone, left somewhere behind, probably drinking the blood of bears and twinkies and trannies and reaming every ass bent over for him. Happy in his sodomy conga line. He was a novelty—a vampire with a monster cock—everyone wanted to go for a ride on Spanky. He'd be so distracted by the number of penises thrust in his face that he wouldn't know of, or care about, a woman edging her way toward his lap. He wouldn't complain—there was enough of him to go

around, and he was on vacation.

Percy wandered away from the beach since it was littered with fucking people. Or, people fucking. (The word 'fuck' had so many meanings that, at that moment, Percy hated them all.) He headed into the nearest town, maybe get something to eat, buy a t-shirt.

Naked people walking, driving cars, enjoying their bicycles excessively, selling their wares. Naked cops directing traffic while getting their cocks sucked or their pussies eaten from behind so as not to obstruct their view maintaining traffic laws. People sitting on rattan chairs fanning their faces, selling fans, while someone bounced in their laps. Ice cream vendors charging extra for fresh semen topping with sprinkles. Or even more if you wanted the female vendor to put your favourite flavour inside of her so that you could eat it out. She had a special harness chair for such a service. So much depravity was a monument to the human imagination.

Percy wandered by, glanced at all the attractions, but quickly ignored them. He came to a poorly painted sign advertising a club called "Rope-A-Dope" with an arrow pointing down a narrow flight of chipped concrete stairs. Curiosity enticed the cat.

A small dark club, lit only by red bulbs. The heavy-breasted twenty-something girl in the ticket booth did not sell tickets. She sold pot, rolling papers, mini-bongs, and pipes in case you forgot yours.

Percy bought some Nepalese Tiger Fuck pot and a small glass pipe with swirling colours. Headed through a bead curtain and entered the main room.

Black battered wooden tables and chairs faced a small stage. A smattering of patrons, some of whom paid waiters and waitresses to sit on their laps or get on their knees under the table.

Percy found a small table in a back corner. Took the pot out of its plastic baggie, stuffed some into his pipe. Needed a light. Gestured for a waitress to come over.

"Hey, sweetie, your pleasure or mine?" she said with a wink and a smile.

She was cute. A petite black girl, maybe Indian, with small perky breasts, large nipples, and a well-shaped vaginal V. Percy would love to kill her.

"I just need a lighter," he said, holding up the pipe.

She reached two fingers into her vagina (no pockets) and pulled out a small disposable lighter with a picture of a dwarf fucking a giant woman on it.

"How much do I owe you?"

"On the house. But maybe you'll remember me when the show starts?"

Percy looked at the stage. Blue and red lights lit its black boards and surrounding curtain.

Probably just your average strip or sex show. A dime a dozen in many world-wide cities, not exclusive to utopia.

“Will do,” he said, lighting his pipe as the waitress wandered off.

He got happily stoned. The pot pushed his depression to the back of his skull where it wouldn't bother him. He ignored the demands of his penis and told himself that he was just here for an entertaining floor show, then it was back out into natural daylight and into the world of absolute freedom.

Fucking Eden.

Told himself to shut up, get high, watch the stage.

In ten minutes it started. The blue lights clicked off and more red lights shone to illuminate and bathe the stage in blood red. Fucking drama.

A beautiful blonde walked out carrying a small stool. Naked. Of course. So Percy told thought silently as he sighed: Okay, no strip show—what was I thinking—the whole island was a strip show. The guy or girl to fuck would be along any minute. She's probably gonna sit on the stool, spread her legs, masturbate for the audience, then a lover arrives to keep the momentum going. Blah blah blah, boring.

None of his predictions came true, however. She faced the audience, put the stool down in front of her feet. Percy could see the details of her face better. She was, or had been, crying.

She started her monologue.

“I am twenty-four years old and I don't want to live anymore. Both my mother and father molested me from a very young age. They sold me as a prostitute to their friends and business partners, as well as a few clients they met on the internet. I was impregnated for the first time at age twelve by my father. The baby was sold to the highest bidder. The father of my second baby was unknown. I was impregnated during an orgy of fifteen men and nine women when I was thirteen. That baby, my son, was also sold. I became a whore on the streets of Prague. Minimum of twenty customers a day. I was beaten by johns and pimps, burned with cigarettes, forced to eat shit and drink piss. My menstrual blood was kept in jars and sold as souvenirs.

“My mother and father were shot by the Czechoslovakian mafia for unpaid debts. I was transferred to Russia where I was owned by a member of their mafia. My photographs and videos were sold on websites catering to paedophiles. I saw none of the money, of course.

“I was forced to fuck dogs and horses and pigs. I fucked young boys and girls, as young as ten years old, as well as old women and men. Entertained Japanese and German and American businessmen. I had yet to reach my sixteenth birthday.

“I slept in a cage when no customer wanted me. I was fed dog food, pissed and shat on. I forgot

how to weep, but if I could fake it well enough for a customer—beg and plead for them not to hurt me—I could make extra money for my pimp. I felt no pain.

“Sex became like tying my shoes. My entire body learned numbness. I was sliced with flick knives and electrocuted. I was forced to wear sandpaper panties and a barbwire collar. I was encouraged by several customers to slit my wrists. They drank the blood, ejaculated on me, spit in my mouth. Then I was bandaged up to heal for another slice.

“I have been addicted to alcohol, cocaine, methamphetamine, horse tranquilizer, heroin, ecstasy, and fifteen other types of drugs. I was first given marijuana when I was seven.

“I tortured and raped many people, on command, including children. I have had eight abortions and five miscarriages.

“I have killed, or assisted in the killing, of ten people. So far.

“Now it is over. I feel nothing in order to feel something again. Enjoy the show.”

Percy’s mouth hung open. He put down his pipe. Didn’t feel the marijuana anymore, suddenly sober. His fingers shook, so he tucked his hands between his legs.

Glancing quickly around at the other patrons, he saw that they didn’t seem to be as affected as he was. They were fucking, getting blowjobs and hand jobs, being finger-fucked. Some of them had already cum, others were holding off.

The blonde stood on the stool. A rope noose descended from the ceiling. She looked ahead into the red light shining in her eyes, seeing nothing, not blinking, her breath steady.

Slipped the noose around her neck. Tightened it. Percy couldn’t help it—an automatic reaction from years of breaking taboo after taboo and finding a greater and greater sexual stimulation—but his penis stiffened. Rose high in his lap. He tried to ignore it, but its head touched his navel.

The rope was cinched tight around her throat, neck skin wrinkled and folded, muscles bulging, face blushed a deep red. The red lights gave way to a single white spot so that the audience could see the stark contrast between the red of her face and the rest of her white body. (Why most of the ‘performers’ were Caucasian.)

Several patrons orgasmed, eyes on the stage.

Already choking, the blonde kicked over the stool. More orgasms erupted throughout the otherwise quiet room. She dangled and swung from her neck. Piss and shit flooded and splattered from her beautiful body and pooled on the stage.

She kicked. She kicked. She kicked.

Percy’s penis blew a stream of semen up to his nipples, some of it landing on the table, soaking

the pot in his pipe. Saliva slipped from the corners of his mouth, but he didn't notice. His anus tingled and his nipples jutted out to sharp points. He waited for the electric wave of orgasm to drain from his possessed body. Then he breathed again.

The blonde's body was removed from the noose by stage hands and carried off. Red light returned to fog away the white. A janitor mopped up the spill, which made the show's hold-outs finally climax.

The entire audience had been satiated by the performance. Some rushed up on stage and headed through the curtains, searching for the back refrigerated room where the body was kept. They wanted more. They, too, were necrophiliacs, their secret only coming to light under the red spot of the new nation.

Percy lit his pipe, drew in a long pull of smoke, let it out slowly. Wondered if he had seen what he thought he saw, or was it fake? Mere theatre of cruelty enhanced by drugs and sex? He had ejaculated, therefore, it worked.

And that's all that really mattered. The entire nation thrived and grew rich on appearances, not on meaning or substance. In that way, it was much like the rest of the world.

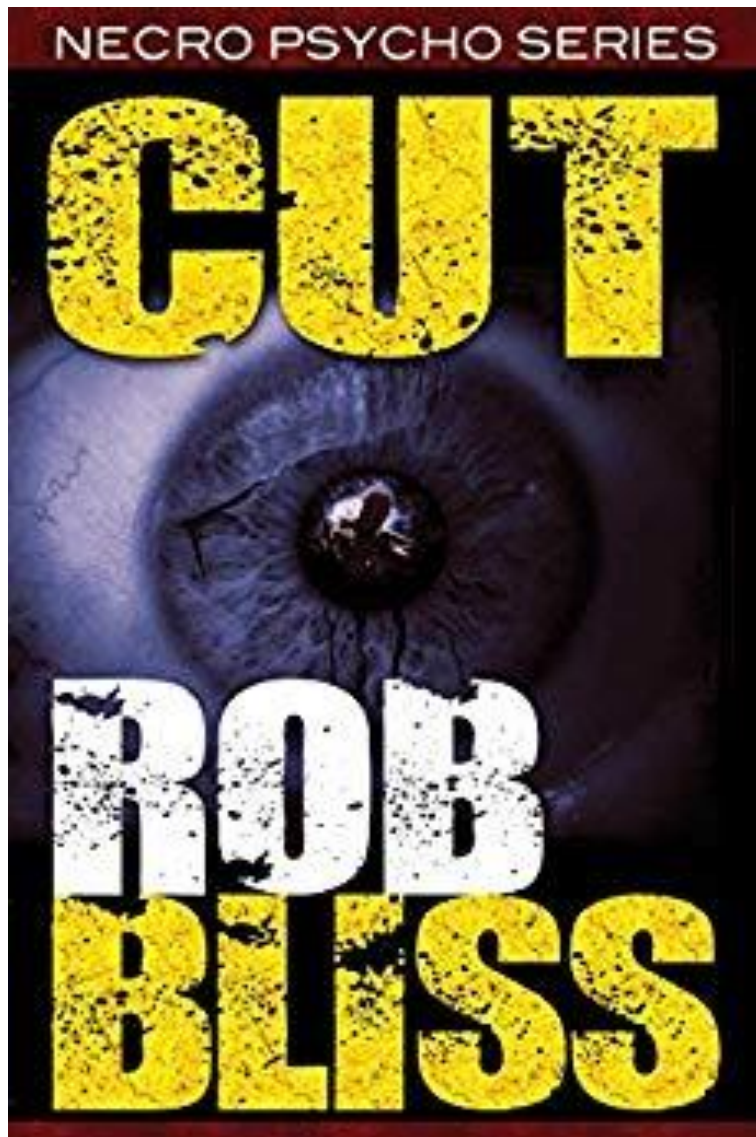
He told a disbelieving Spanky about it the next day. But his best friend was glad that the necrophiliac had finally found his fun and was as happy as the rest of the island's population. Spanky, too, was satiated.

All this on Day One.

And they still had six days left to their vacation.

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Forty-Two

“It gives me much honour,” Turhan Mot said, “to present to the great Horst Dal and his friend, the noble freebooter called Yamir, these captives, the infamous Carter Ward.

“This is he, who thrust his sabot into our campaign, as the ancient legends might have expressed it, against Callisto and the other habitable moons of Jupiter. This is he who fouled our capture of Interplanetary Station 3. This is he who has brought the hounds of Earth Space Forces, come slaving at our heels, snapping at the cuffs of our jump suits.

“And with him, I bring a captive of special interest to the great and grand Horst Dal. I bring him the girl, the impertinent prostitute who likes to talk far, far, too much. Because of her, word of Astra Palace has found its way to the ears of Earth and her Space Forces. Even now, these monsters are massing for their attack against us, when once they have determined our location. All that, with no thanks to this careless girl, one called ‘Lacey’.”

Horst Dal turned to Yamir and smiled. Yamir grinned at Horst Dal and nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “Bring them in.”

Turhan Mot nodded at Mokem Bet. Mokem Bet disappeared momentarily behind a thick curtain of purple satins and lavender-dyed furs. Gems were threaded into the curtains, and precious metals frilled the edges.

A moment later Mokem Bet returned, leading Lacey and Carter Ward, both in chains. They were both naked, bound in chains of gold. Ward’s arms were pinned to a golden belt that encircled his waist, and in such a manner that he must lean forward in a most awkward and uncomfortable posture. His ankles were hobbled with a chain that severely restricted the length of his stride, making it impossible for Ward to either run or kick.

Lacey was similarly shackled, but not nearly so uncomfortably so. Posing no threat, there was no need to subject her to further discomfort. Sensitive to Horst Dal’s aversion to the inflicting of suffering without need, Turhan Mot was careful to avoid doing so. Indeed, he realized that he could use the suffering of Carter Ward, and the relatively gentle treatment of Lacey, to further emphasize the dangers posed by the former while yet pointing out the harmlessness of the latter. Thus, with the hand of master painter, he was able to contrast the dark personality of Carter Ward against the light personality, and juxtaposition of light and shade that could only draw Horst Dal and his friend, Yamir, into the tale that he, Turhan Mot was telling.

As it certainly did.

Both captives were blindfolded. Around their necks were bands of gold. The band surrounding Lacey’s lovely throat was light in weight and loose about her neck, and may as well have been a necklace. From it there depended a single chain, the opposite end of which Mokem Bet held in

his hand and which he used to guide her steps.

The band that wrapped itself around Carter Ward's neck was tight. It choked. His face was white. Six heavy chains hung from thick rings mounted on the band. Six servants kept firm grips on the opposite ends of the chains, keeping them taut, forming a ring with Carter well-trapped in the centre.

Because of the near weightlessness of Astra Palace, his guards were able to hover over Ward's head, and under him. From every angle they surrounded him, making any surreptitious moves ineffectual. A tug from any chain sent Ward reeling.

Mokem Bet led the procession up to Turhan Mot. Once before Turhan Mot, Mokem Bet offered him the chain with which he led Lacey. Turhan Mot took the chain in his own hand, then turned and moved, half swimming, half it may have swimming, toward Horst Dal, lounging upon his heavy chair.

Horst Dal studied the two captives in silence for several moments. A smile teased the corners of his mouth.

"We would see the face of this one, this Lacey," he said, to Turhan Mot.

Turhan Mot bowed his head to Horst Dal. Silently, he raised the silken blindfold over her face, then pulled it back over her hair. Turhan Mot had been careful to have Lacey bathed, her golden hair cleaned, brushed and combed, so that it stood out like a dazzling mane, especially against the yellow lurid lamps that illuminated the violet-tinted suites.

Tears streamed down Lacey's face. Her body trembled uncontrollably.

"You may unshackle the girl," Horst Dal said. Turhan Mot quickly obliged.

"So, this is the girl who likes to talk. A pity, that. Truly, a pity. For she is so very lovely. I should have been pleased to have added her to my private attendants. But that's impossible, now. We can't have the silly chatter. That only makes trouble for all of us."

Lacey did not speak, for Turhan Mot had counselled her against speaking in the presence of Horst Dal, except to answer any question he might put to her. Which he did not. He had met Lacey before, of course, and his curiosity about her was already exhausted.

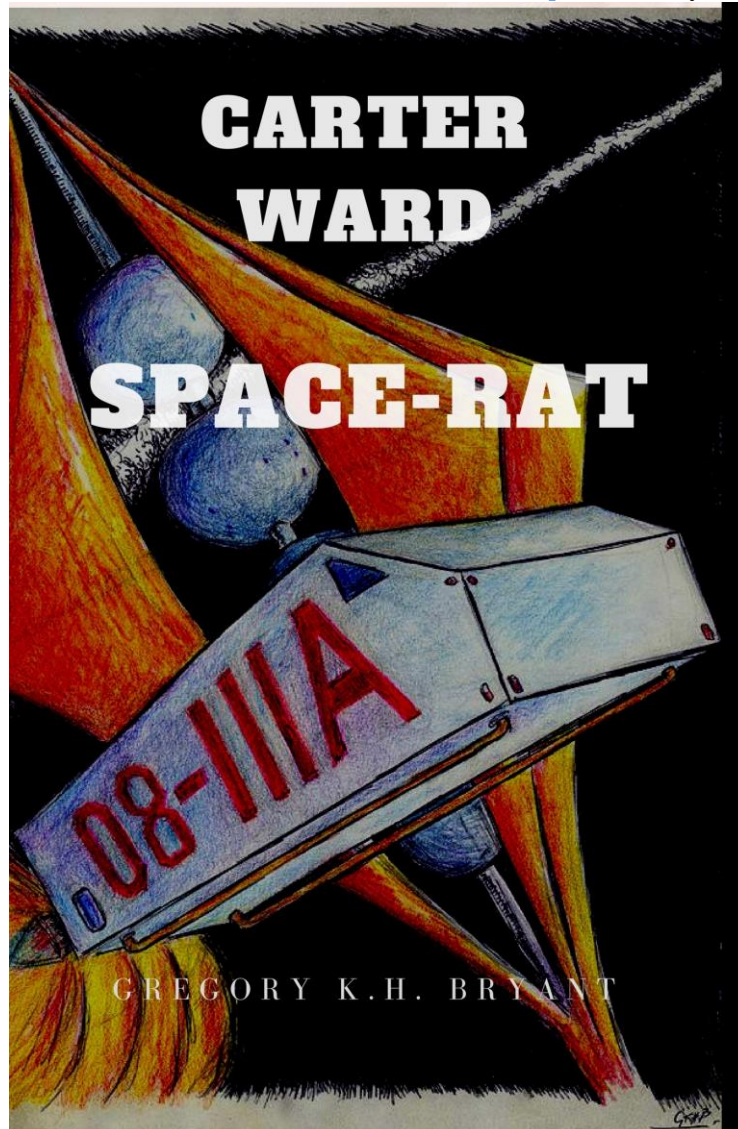
It was Ward who held Horst Dal's attention. Lean, hard and muscular, with myriad scars stitched into his flesh, the man had been through many battles. Horst Dal turned to study Carter Ward for a moment.

"Let us look upon this man," Horst Dal said to Turhan Mot. Turhan Mot nodded to Mokem Bet. Mokem Bet yanked the bandage from Ward's face.

"So this is he. This is that infamous and terrible man, Carter Ward."

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



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ERIC BRIGHTYES by H Rider Haggard

II: How Eric Told His Love to Gudruda in the Snow on Coldback

Now, it must be told that, five years before the day of the death of Gudruda the Gentle, Saevuna, the wife of Thorgrimur Iron-Toe, gave birth to a son, at Coldback in the Marsh, on Ran River, and when his father came to look upon the child he called out aloud:

“Here we have a wondrous bairn, for his hair is yellow like gold and his eyes shine bright as stars.” And Thorgrimur named him Eric Brighteyes.

Now, Coldback is but an hour’s ride from Middalhof, and it chanced, in after years, that Thorgrimur went up to Middalhof, to keep the Yule feast and worship in the Temple, for he was in the priesthood of Asmund Asmundson, bringing the boy Eric with him. There also was Groa with Swanhild, for now she dwelt at Middalhof; and the three fair children were set together in the hall to play, and men thought it great sport to see them. Now, Gudruda had a horse of wood and would ride it while Eric pushed the horse along. But Swanhild smote her from the horse and called to Eric to make it move; but he comforted Gudruda and would not, and at that Swanhild was angry and lisped out:

“Push thou must, if I will it, Eric.”

Then he pushed sideways and with such good will that Swanhild fell almost into the fire of the hearth, and, leaping up, she snatched a brand and threw it at Gudruda, firing her clothes. Men laughed at this; but Groa, standing apart, frowned and muttered witch-words.

“Why lookest thou so darkly, housekeeper?” said Asmund; “the boy is bonny and high of heart.”

“Ah, he is bonny as no child is, and he shall be bonny all his life-days. Nevertheless, she shall not stand against his ill luck. This I prophesy of him: that women shall bring him to his end, and he shall die a hero’s death, but not at the hand of his foes.”

And now the years went by peacefully. Groa dwelt with her daughter Swanhild up at Middalhof and was the love of Asmund Asmundson. But, though he forgot his oath thus far, yet he would never take her to wife. The witchwife was angered at this, and she schemed and plotted much to bring it about that Asmund should wed her. But still he would not, though in all things else she led him as it were by a halter.

Twenty full years had gone by since Gudruda the Gentle was laid in earth; and now Gudruda the Fair and Swanhild the Fatherless were women too. Eric, too, was a man of five-and-twenty years, and no such man had lived in Iceland. For he was strong and great of stature, his hair was yellow as gold, and his grey eyes shone with the light of swords. He was gentle and loving as a woman, and even as a lad his strength was the strength of two men; and there were none in all the quarter who could leap or swim or wrestle against Eric Brighteyes. Men held him in honour and spoke well of him, though as yet he had done no deeds, but lived at home on Coldback, managing the farm, for now Thorgrimur Iron-Toe, his father, was dead. But women loved him

much, and that was his bane—for of all women he loved but one, Gudruda the Fair, Asmund's daughter. He loved her from a child, and her alone till his day of death, and she, too, loved him and him only. For now Gudruda was a maid of maids, most beautiful to see and sweet to hear. Her hair, like the hair of Eric, was golden, and she was white as the snow on Hecla; but her eyes were large and dark, and black lashes drooped above them. For the rest she was tall and strong and comely, merry of face, yet tender, and the most witty of women.

Swanhild also was very fair; she was slender, small of limb, and dark of hue, having eyes blue as the deep sea, and brown curling hair, enough to veil her to the knees, and a mind of which none knew the end, for, though she was open in her talk, her thoughts were dark and secret. This was her joy: to draw the hearts of men to her and then to mock them. She beguiled many in this fashion, for she was the cunningest girl in matters of love, and she knew well the arts of women, with which they bring men to nothing. Nevertheless she was cold at heart, and desired power and wealth greatly, and she studied magic much, of which her mother Groa also had a store. But Swanhild, too, loved a man, and that was the joint in her harness by which the shaft of Fate entered her heart, for that man was Eric Brighteyes, who loved her not. But she desired him so sorely that, without him, all the world was dark to her, and her soul but as a ship driven rudderless upon a winter night. Therefore she put out all her strength to win him, and bent her witcheries upon him, and they were not few nor small. Nevertheless they went by him like the wind, for he dreamed ever of Gudruda alone, and he saw no eyes but hers, though as yet they spoke no word of love one to the other.

But Swanhild in her wrath took counsel with her mother Groa, though there was little liking between them; and, when she had heard the maiden's tale, Groa laughed aloud:

"Dost think me blind, girl?" she said; "all of this I have seen, yea and foreseen, and I tell thee thou art mad. Let this yeoman Eric go and I will find thee finer fowl to fly at."

"Nay, that I will not," quoth Swanhild: "for I love this man alone, and I would win him; and Gudruda I hate, and I would overthrow her. Give me of thy counsel."

Groa laughed again. "Things must be as they are fated. This now is my rede: Asmund would turn Gudruda's beauty to account, and that man must be rich in friends and money who gets her to wife, and in this matter the mind of Björn is as the mind of his father. Now we will watch, and, when a good time chances, we will bear tales of Gudruda to Asmund and to her brother Björn, and swear that she oversteps her modesty with Eric. Then shall Asmund be wroth and drive Eric from Gudruda's side. Meanwhile, I will do this: In the north there dwells a man mighty in all things and blown up with pride. He is named Ospakar Blacktooth. His wife is but lately dead, and he has given out that he will wed the fairest maid in Iceland. Now, it is in my mind to send Koll the Half-witted, my thrall, whom Asmund gave to me, to Ospakar as though by chance. He is a great talker and very clever, for in his half-wits is more cunning than in the brains of most; and he shall so bepraise Gudruda's beauty that Ospakar will come hither to ask her in marriage; and in this fashion, if things go well, thou shalt be rid of thy rival, and I of one who looks scornfully upon me. But, if this fail, then there are two roads left on which strong feet may travel to their end; and of these, one is that thou shouldest win Eric away with thine own beauty, and that is not little. All men are frail, and I have a draught that will make the heart as wax; but yet

the other path is surer.”

“And what is that path, my mother?”

“It runs through blood to blackness. By thy side is a knife and in Gudruda’s bosom beats a heart. Dead women are unmeet for love!”

Swanhild tossed her head and looked upon the dark face of Groa her mother.

“Methinks, with such an end to win, I should not fear to tread that path, if there be need, my mother.”

“Now I see thou art indeed my daughter. Happiness is to the bold. To each it comes in uncertain shape. Some love power, some wealth, and some—a man. Take that which thou lovest—I say, cut thy path to it and take it; else shall thy life be but a weariness: for what does it serve to win the wealth and power when thou lovest a man alone, or the man when thou dost desire gold and the pride of place? This is wisdom: to satisfy the longing of thy youth; for age creeps on apace and beyond is darkness. Therefore, if thou seekest this man, and Gudruda blocks thy path, slay her, girl—by witchcraft or by steel—and take him, and in his arms forget that thine own are red. But first let us try the easier plan. Daughter, I too hate this proud girl, who scorns me as her father’s light-of-love. I too long to see that bright head of hers dull with the dust of death, or, at the least, those proud eyes weeping tears of shame as the man she hates leads her hence as a bride. Were it not for her I should be Asmund’s wife, and, when she is gone, with thy help—for he loves thee much and has cause to love thee—this I may be yet. So in this matter, if in no other, let us go hand in hand and match our wits against her innocence.”

Now, Koll the Half-witted went upon his errand, and the time passed till it lacked but a month to Yule, and men sat indoors, for the season was dark and much snow fell. At length came frost, and with it a clear sky, and Gudruda, ceasing from her spinning in the hall, went to the woman’s porch, and, looking out, saw that the snow was hard, and a great longing came upon her to breathe the fresh air, for there was still an hour of daylight. So she threw a cloak about her and walked forth, taking the road towards Coldback in the Marsh that is by Ran River. But Swanhild watched her till she was over the hill. Then she also took a cloak and followed on that path, for she always watched Gudruda.

Gudruda walked on for the half of an hour or so, when she became aware that the clouds gathered in the sky, and that the air was heavy with snow to come. Seeing this she turned homewards, and Swanhild hid herself to let her pass. Now flakes floated down as big and soft as fifea flowers. Quicker and more quick they came till all the plain was one white maze of mist, but through it Gudruda walked on, and after her crept Swanhild, like a shadow. And now the darkness gathered and the snow fell thick and fast, covering up the track of her footsteps and she wandered from the path, and after her wandered Swanhild, being loath to show herself. For an hour or more Gudruda wandered and then she called aloud and her voice fell heavily against the cloak of snow. At the last she grew weary and frightened, and sat down upon a shelving rock whence the snow had slipped away. Now, a little way behind was another rock and there Swanhild sat, for she wished to be unseen of Gudruda. So some time passed, and Swanhild grew

heavy as though with sleep, when of a sudden a moving thing loomed upon the snowy darkness. Then Gudruda leapt to her feet and called. A man's voice answered:

"Who passes there?"

"I, Gudruda, Asmund's daughter."

The form came nearer; now Swanhild could hear the snorting of a horse, and now a man leapt from it, and that man was Eric Brighteyes.

"Is it thou indeed, Gudruda!" he said with a laugh, and his great shape showed darkly on the snow mist.

"Oh, is it thou, Eric?" she answered. "I was never more joyed to see thee; for of a truth thou dost come in a good hour. A little while and I had seen thee no more, for my eyes grow heavy with the death-sleep."

"Nay, say not so. Art lost, then? Why, so am I. I came out to seek three horses that are strayed, and was overtaken by the snow. May they dwell in Odin's stables, for they have led me to thee. Art thou cold, Gudruda?"

"But a little, Eric. Yea, there is place for thee here on the rock."

So he sat down by her on the stone, and Swanhild crept nearer; for now all weariness had left her. But still the snow fell thick.

"It comes into my mind that we two shall die here," said Gudruda presently.

"Thinkest thou so?" he answered. "Well, I will say this, that I ask no better end."

"It is a bad end for thee, Eric: to be choked in snow, and with all thy deeds to do."

"It is a good end, Gudruda, to die at thy side, for so I shall die happy; but I grieve for thee."

"Grieve not for me, Brighteyes, worse things might befall."

He drew nearer to her, and now he put his arms about her and clasped her to his bosom; nor did she say him nay. Swanhild saw and lifted herself up behind them, but for a while she heard nothing but the beating of her heart.

"Listen, Gudruda," Eric said at last. "Death draws near to us, and before it comes I would speak to thee, if speak I may."

"Speak on," she whispers from his breast.

"This I would say, then: that I love thee, and that I ask no better fate than to die in thy arms."

“First shalt thou see me die in thine, Eric.”

“Be sure, if that is so, I shall not tarry for long. Oh! Gudruda, since I was a child I have loved thee with a mighty love, and now thou art all to me. Better to die thus than to live without thee. Speak, then, while there is time.”

“I will not hide from thee, Eric, that thy words are sweet in my ears.”

And now Gudruda sobs and the tears fall fast from her dark eyes.

“Nay, weep not. Dost thou, then, love me?”

“Ay, sure enough, Eric.”

“Then kiss me before we pass. A man should not die thus, and yet men have died worse.”

And so these two kissed, for the first time, out in the snow on Coldback, and that first kiss was long and sweet.

Swanhild heard and her blood seethed within her as water seethes in a boiling spring when the fires wake beneath. She put her hand to her kirtle and gripped the knife at her side. She half drew it, then drove it back.

“Cold kills as sure as steel,” she said in her heart. “If I slay her I cannot save myself or him. Let us die in peace, and let the snow cover up our troubling.” And once more she listened.

“Ah, sweet,” said Eric, “even in the midst of death there is hope of life. Swear to me, then, that if by chance we live thou wilt love me always as thou lovest me now.”

“Ay, Eric, I swear that and readily.”

“And swear, come what may, that thou wilt wed no man but me.”

“I swear, if thou dost remain true to me, that I will wed none but thee, Eric.”

“Then I am sure of thee.”

“Boast not overmuch, Eric: if thou dost live thy days are all before thee, and with times come trials.”

Now the snow whirled down faster and more thick, till these two, clasped heart to heart, were but a heap of white, and all white was the horse, and Swanhild was nearly buried.

“Where go we when we die, Eric?” said Gudruda; “in Odin’s house there is no place for maids, and how shall my feet fare without thee?”

“Nay, sweet, my May, Valhalla shuts its gates to me, a deedless man; up Bifrost’s rainbow bridge I may not travel, for I do not die with byrnie on breast and sword aloft. To Hela shall we go, and hand in hand.”

“Art thou sure, Eric, that men find these abodes? To say sooth, at times I misdoubt me of them.”

“I am not so sure but that I also doubt. Still, I know this: that where thou goest there I shall be, Gudruda.”

“Then things are well, and well work the Norns.¹ Still, Eric, of a sudden I grow fey: for it comes upon me that I shall not die to-night, but that, nevertheless, I shall die with thy arms about me, and at thy side. There, I see it on the snow! I lie by thee, sleeping, and one comes with hands outstretched and sleep falls from them like a mist—by Freya, it is Swanhild’s self! Oh! it is gone.”

“It was nothing, Gudruda, but a vision of the snow—an untimely dream that comes before the sleep. I grow cold and my eyes are heavy; kiss me once again.”

“It was no dream, Eric, and ever I doubt me of Swanhild, for I think she loves thee also, and she is fair and my enemy,” says Gudruda, laying her snow-cold lips on his lips. “Oh, Eric, awake! awake! See, the snow is done.”

He stumbled to his feet and looked forth. Lo! out across the sky flared the wild Northern fires, throwing light upon the darkness.

“Now it seems that I know the land,” said Eric. “Look: yonder are Golden Falls, though we did not hear them because of the snow; and there, out at sea, loom the Westmans; and that dark thing is the Temple Hof, and behind it stands the stead. We are saved, Gudruda, and thus far indeed thou wast fey. Now rise, ere thy limbs stiffen, and I will set thee on the horse, if he still can run, and lead thee down to Middalhof before the witchlights fail us.”

“So it shall be, Eric.”

Now he led Gudruda to the horse—that, seeing its master, snorted and shook the snow from its coat, for it was not frozen—and set her on the saddle, and put his arm about her waist, and they passed slowly through the deep snow. And Swanhild, too, crept from her place, for her burning rage had kept the life in her, and followed after them. Many times she fell, and once she was nearly swallowed in a drift of snow and cried out in her fear.

“Who called aloud?” said Eric, turning; “I thought I heard a voice.”

“Nay,” answers Gudruda, “it was but a night-hawk screaming.”

¹ The Northern Fates.

Now Swanhild lay quiet in the drift, but she said in her heart:

“Ay, a night-hawk that shall tear out those dark eyes of thine, mine enemy!”

The two go on and at length they come to the banked roadway that runs past the Temple to Asmund’s hall. Here Swanhild leaves them, and, climbing over the turf-wall into the home meadow, passes round the hall by the outbuildings and so comes to the west end of the house, and enters by the men’s door unnoticed of any. For all the people, seeing a horse coming and a woman seated on it, were gathered in front of the hall. But Swanhild ran to that shut bed where she slept, and, closing the curtain, threw off her garments, shook the snow from her hair, and put on a linen kirtle. Then she rested a while, for she was weary, and, going to the kitchen, warmed herself at the fire.

Meanwhile Eric and Gudruda came to the house and there Asmund greeted them well, for he was troubled in his heart about his daughter, and very glad to know her living, seeing that men had but now begun to search for her, because of the snow and the darkness.

Now Gudruda told her tale, but not all of it, and Asmund bade Eric to the house. Then one asked about Swanhild, and Eric said that he had seen nothing of her, and Asmund was sad at this, for he loved Swanhild. But as he told all men to go and search, an old wife came and said that Swanhild was in the kitchen, and while the carline spoke she came into the hall, dressed in white, very pale, and with shining eyes and fair to see.

“Where hast thou been, Swanhild?” said Asmund. “I thought certainly thou wast perishing with Gudruda in the snow, and now all men go to seek thee while the witchlights burn.”

“Nay, foster-father, I have been to the Temple,” she answered, lying. “So Gudruda has but narrowly escaped the snow, thanks be to Brighteyes yonder! Surely I am glad of it, for we could ill spare our sweet sister,” and, going up to her, she kissed her. But Gudruda saw that her eyes burned like fire and felt that her lips were cold as ice, and shrank back wondering.

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THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

Chapter XXII: The Casting of the Shadow

Now we were racing down toward that last span whose ancientness had set it apart from all the other soaring arches. The shell's speed slackened; we approached warily.

"We pass there?" asked O'Keefe.

The green dwarf nodded, pointing to the right where the bridge ended in a broad platform held high upon two gigantic piers, between which ran a spur from the glistening road. Platform and bridge were swarming with men-at-arms; they crowded the parapets, looking down upon us curiously but with no evidence of hostility. Rador drew a deep breath of relief.

"We don't have to break our way through, then?" There was disappointment in the Irishman's voice.

"No use, Larree!" Smiling, Rador stopped the corial just beneath the arch and beside one of the piers. "Now, listen well. They have had no warning, hence does Yolara still think us on the way to the temple. This is the gateway of the Portal—and the gateway is closed by the Shadow. Once I commanded here and I know its laws. This must I do—by craft persuade Serku, the keeper of the gateway, to lift the Shadow; or raise it myself. And that will be hard and it may well be that in the struggle life will be stripped of us all. Yet is it better to die fighting than to dance with the Shining One!"

He swept the shell around the pier. Opened a wide plaza paved with the volcanic glass, but black as that down which we had sped from the chamber of the Moon Pool. It shone like a mirrored lakelet of jet; on each side of it arose what at first glance seemed towering bulwarks of the same ebon obsidian; at second, revealed themselves as structures hewn and set in place by men; polished faces pierced by dozens of high, narrow windows.

Down each facade a stairway fell, broken by small landings on which a door opened; they dropped to a broad ledge of greyish stone edging the lip of this midnight pool and upon it also fell two wide flights from either side of the bridge platform. Along all four stairways the guards were ranged; and here and there against the ledge stood the shells—in a curiously comforting resemblance to parked motors in our own world.

The sombre walls bulked high; curved and ended in two obelisked pillars from which, like a tremendous curtain, stretched a barrier of that tenebrous gloom which, though weightless as shadow itself, I now knew to be as impenetrable as the veil between life and death. In this murk, unlike all others I had seen, I sensed movement, a quivering, a tremor constant and rhythmic; not to be seen, yet caught by some subtle sense; as though through it beat a swift pulse of—black light.

The green dwarf turned the corial slowly to the edge at the right; crept cautiously on toward where, not more than a hundred feet from the barrier, a low, wide entrance opened in the fort.

Guarding its threshold stood two guards, armed with broadswords, double-handed, terminating in a wide lunette mouthed with murderous fangs. These they raised in salute and through the portal strode a dwarf huge as Rador, dressed as he and carrying only the poniard that was the badge of office of Muria's captainry.

The green dwarf swept the shell expertly against the ledge; leaped out.

"Greeting, Serku!" he answered. "I was but looking for the coria of Lakla."

"Lakla!" exclaimed Serku. "Why, the handmaiden passed with her Akka nigh a va ago!"

"Passed!" The astonishment of the green dwarf was so real that half was I myself deceived. "You let her pass?"

"Certainly I let her pass—" But under the green dwarf's stern gaze the truculence of the guardian faded. "Why should I not?" he asked, apprehensively.

"Because Yolara commanded otherwise," answered Rador, coldly.

"There came no command to me." Little beads of sweat stood out on Serku's forehead.

"Serku," interrupted the green dwarf swiftly, "truly is my heart wrung for you. This is a matter of Yolara and of Lugur and the Council; yes, even of the Shining One! And the message was sent—and the fate, mayhap, of all Muria rested upon your obedience and the return of Lakla with these strangers to the Council. Now truly is my heart wrung, for there are few I would less like to see dance with the Shining One than you, Serku," he ended, softly.

Livid now was the gateway's guardian, his great frame shaking.

"Come with me and speak to Yolara," he pleaded. "There came no message—tell her—"

"Wait, Serku!" There was a thrill as of inspiration in Rador's voice. "This corial is of the swiftest—Lakla's are of the slowest. With Lakla scarce a va ahead we can reach her before she enters the Portal. Lift you the Shadow—we will bring her back, and this will I do for you, Serku."

Doubt tempered Serku's panic.

"Why not go alone, Rador, leaving the strangers here with me?" he asked—and I thought not unreasonably.

"Nay, then." The green dwarf was brusque. "Lakla will not return unless I carry to her these men as evidence of our good faith. Come—we will speak to Yolara and she shall judge you—" He started away—but Serku caught his arm.

"No, Rador, no!" he whispered, again panic-stricken. "Go you—as you will. But bring her back!"

Speed, Rador!” He sprang toward the entrance. “I lift the Shadow—”

Into the green dwarf’s poise crept a curious, almost a listening, alertness. He leaped to Serku’s side.

“I go with you,” I heard. “Some little I can tell you—” They were gone.

“Fine work!” muttered Larry. “Nominated for a citizen of Ireland when we get out of this, one Rador of—”

The Shadow trembled—shuddered into nothingness; the obelisked outposts that had held it framed a ribbon of roadway, high banked with verdure, vanishing in green distances.

And then from the portal sped a shriek, a death cry! It cut through the silence of the ebon pit like a whimpering arrow. Before it had died, down the stairways came pouring the guards. Those at the threshold raised their swords and peered within. Abruptly Rador was between them. One dropped his hilt and gripped him—the green dwarf’s poniard flashed and was buried in his throat. Down upon Rador’s head swept the second blade. A flame leaped from O’Keefe’s hand and the sword seemed to fling itself from its wielder’s grasp—another flash and the soldier crumpled. Rador threw himself into the shell, darted to the high seat—and straight between the pillars of the Shadow we flew!

There came a crackling, a darkness of vast wings flinging down upon us. The corial’s flight was checked as by a giant’s hand. The shell swerved sickeningly; there was an oddly metallic splintering; it quivered; shot ahead. Dizzily I picked myself up and looked behind.

The Shadow had fallen—but too late, a bare instant too late. And shrinking as we fled from it, still it seemed to strain like some fettered Afrit from Eblis, throbbing with wrath, seeking with every malign power it possessed to break its bonds and pursue. Not until long after were we to know that it had been the dying hand of Serku, groping out of oblivion, that had cast it after us as a fowler upon an escaping bird.

“Snappy work, Rador!” It was Larry speaking. “But they cut the end off your bus all right!”

A full quarter of the hindward whorl was gone, sliced off cleanly. Rador noted it with anxious eyes.

“That is bad,” he said, “but not too bad perhaps. All depends upon how closely Lugur and his men can follow us.”

He raised a hand to O’Keefe in salute.

“But to you, Larree, I owe my life—not even the Keth could have been as swift to save me as that death flame of yours—friend!”

The Irishman waved an airy hand.

“Serku”—the green dwarf drew from his girdle the bloodstained poniard—”Serku I was forced to slay. Even as he raised the Shadow the globe gave the alarm. Lugur follows with twice ten times ten of his best—” He hesitated. “Though we have escaped the Shadow it has taken toll of our swiftness. May we reach the Portal before it closes upon Lakla—but if we do not—” He paused again. “Well—I know a way—but it is not one I am gay to follow—no!”

He snapped open the aperture that held the ball flaming within the dark crystal; peered at it anxiously. I crept to the torn end of the corial. The edges were crumbling, disintegrated. They powdered in my fingers like dust. Mystified still, I crept back where Larry, sheer happiness pouring from him, was whistling softly and polishing up his automatic. His gaze fell upon Olaf’s grim, sad face and softened.

“Buck up, Olaf!” he said. “We’ve got a good fighting chance. Once we link up with Lakla and her crowd I’m betting that we get your wife—never doubt it! The baby—” he hesitated awkwardly. The Norseman’s eyes filled; he stretched a hand to the O’Keefe.

“The Yndling—she is of the de Dode,” he half whispered, “of the blessed dead. For her I have no fear and for her vengeance will be given me. Ja! But my Helma—she is of the dead-alive—like those we saw whirling like leaves in the light of the Shining Devil—and I would that she too were of de Dode—and at rest. I do not know how to fight the Shining Devil—no!”

His bitter despair welled up in his voice.

“Olaf,” Larry’s voice was gentle. “We’ll come out on top—I know it. Remember one thing. All this stuff that seems so strange and—and, well, sort of supernatural, is just a lot of tricks we’re not hep to as yet. Why, Olaf, suppose you took a Fijian when the war was on and set him suddenly down in London with autos rushing past, sirens blowing, Archies popping, a dozen enemy planes dropping bombs, and the searchlights shooting all over the sky—wouldn’t he think he was among thirty-third degree devils in some exclusive circle of hell? Sure he would! And yet everything he saw would be natural—just as natural as all this is, once we get the answer to it. Not that we’re Fijians, of course, but the principle is the same.”

The Norseman considered this; nodded gravely.

“Ja!” he answered at last. “And at least we can fight. That is why I have turned to Thor of the battles, Ja! And one have I hope in for mine Helma—the white maiden. Since I have turned to the old gods it has been made clear to me that I shall slay Lugur and that the Heks, the evil witch Yolara, shall also die. But I would talk with the white maiden.”

“All right,” said Larry, “but just don’t be afraid of what you don’t understand. There’s another thing”—he hesitated, nervously—”there’s another thing that may startle you a bit when we meet up with Lakla—her—er—frogs!”

“Like the frog-woman we saw on the wall?” asked Olaf.

“Yes,” went on Larry, rapidly. “It’s this way—I figure that the frogs grow rather large where she lives, and they’re a bit different too. Well, Lakla’s got a lot of ‘em trained. Carry spears and clubs and all that junk—just like trained seals or monkeys or so on in the circus. Probably a custom of the place. Nothing queer about that, Olaf. Why people have all kinds of pets—armadillos and snakes and rabbits, kangaroos and elephants and tigers.”

Remembering how the frog-woman had stuck in Larry’s mind from the outset, I wondered whether all this was not more to convince himself than Olaf.

“Why, I remember a nice girl in Paris who had four pet pythons—” he went on.

But I listened no more, for now I was sure of my surmise. The road had begun to thrust itself through high-flung, sharply pinnaced masses and rounded outcroppings of rock on which clung patches of the amber moss.

The trees had utterly vanished, and studding the moss-carpeted plains were only clumps of a willowy shrub from which hung, like grapes, clusters of white waxen blooms. The light too had changed; gone were the dancing, sparkling atoms and the silver had faded to a soft, almost ashen greyness. Ahead of us marched a rampart of coppery cliffs rising, like all these mountainous walls we had seen, into the immensities of haze. Something long drifting in my subconsciousness turned to startled realization. The speed of the shell was slackening! The aperture containing the ionizing mechanism was still open; I glanced within. The whirling ball of fire was not dimmed, but its coruscations, instead of pouring down through the cylinder, swirled and eddied and shot back as though trying to re-enter their source. Rador nodded grimly.

“The Shadow takes its toll,” he said.

We topped a rise—Larry gripped my arm.

“Look!” he cried, and pointed. Far, far behind us, so far that the road was but a glistening thread, a score of shining points came speeding.

“Lugur and his men,” said Rador.

“Can’t you step on her?” asked Larry.

“Step on her?” repeated the green dwarf, puzzled.

“Give her more speed; push her,” explained O’Keefe.

Rador looked about him. The coppery ramparts were close, not more than three or four miles distant; in front of us the plain lifted in a long rolling swell, and up this the corial essayed to go—with a terrifying lessening of speed. Faintly behind us came shootings, and we knew that Lugur drew close. Nor anywhere was there sign of Lakla nor her frogmen.

Now we were half-way to the crest; the shell barely crawled and from beneath it came a faint

hissing; it quivered, and I knew that its base was no longer held above the glassy surface but rested on it.

“One last chance!” exclaimed Rador. He pressed upon the control lever and wrenched it from its socket. Instantly the sparkling ball expanded, whirling with prodigious rapidity and sending a cascade of coruscations into the cylinder. The shell rose; leaped through the air; the dark crystal split into fragments; the fiery ball dulled; died—but upon the impetus of that last thrust we reached the crest. Poised there for a moment, I caught a glimpse of the road dropping down the side of an enormous moss-covered, bowl-shaped valley whose sharply curved sides ended abruptly at the base of the towering barrier.

Then down the steep, powerless to guide or to check the shell, we plunged in a meteor rush straight for the annihilating adamantine breasts of the cliffs!

Now the quick thinking of Larry’s air training came to our aid. As the rampart reared close he threw himself upon Rador; hurled him and himself against the side of the flying whorl. Under the shock the finely balanced machine swerved from its course. It struck the soft, low bank of the road, shot high in air, bounded on through the thick carpeting, whirled like a dervish and fell upon its side. Shot from it, we rolled for yards, but the moss saved broken bones or serious bruise.

“Quick!” cried the green dwarf. He seized an arm, dragged me to my feet, began running to the cliff base not a hundred feet away. Beside us raced O’Keefe and Olaf. At our left was the black road. It stopped abruptly—was cut off by a slab of polished crimson stone a hundred feet high, and as wide, set within the coppery face of the barrier. On each side of it stood pillars, cut from the living rock and immense, almost, as those which held the rainbow veil of the Dweller. Across its face weaved unnameable carvings—but I had no time for more than a glance. The green dwarf gripped my arm again.

“Quick!” he cried again. “The handmaiden has passed!”

At the right of the Portal ran a low wall of shattered rock. Over this we raced like rabbits. Hidden behind it was a narrow path. Crouching, Rador in the lead, we sped along it; three hundred, four hundred yards we raced—and the path ended in a cul de sac! To our ears was borne a louder shouting.

The first of the pursuing shells had swept over the lip of the great bowl, poised for a moment as we had and then began a cautious descent. Within it, scanning the slopes, I saw Lugal.

“A little closer and I’ll get him!” whispered Larry viciously. He raised his pistol.

His hand was caught in a mighty grip; Rador, eyes blazing, stood beside him.

“No!” rasped the green dwarf. He heaved a shoulder against one of the boulders that formed the pocket. It rocked aside, revealing a slit.

“In!” ordered he, straining against the weight of the stone. O’Keefe slipped through. Olaf at his back, I following. With a lightning leap the dwarf was beside me, the huge rock missing him by a hair breadth as it swung into place!

We were in Cimmerian darkness. I felt for my pocket-flash and recalled with distress that I had left it behind with my medicine kit when we fled from the gardens. But Rador seemed to need no light.

“Grip hands!” he ordered. We crept, single file, holding to each other like children, through the black. At last the green dwarf paused.

“Await me here,” he whispered. “Do not move. And for your lives—be silent!”

And he was gone.

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