

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

**VOL. 11, ISSUE 22
16TH JULY 2017**

A ROMANCE

**BY JOSEPH J
PATCHEN—
THEY SEEK OUT
WHAT IS
DECAYING AND
BROKEN...**

A MEETING WITH DEATH

**BY STEVEN
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—OLDER THAN
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**QUEST FOR FOOD
BY GAVIN
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**THE BATTLE
FOR CALLISTO:
EPISODE FIFTEEN
BY GREGORY KH BRYANT**

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Verne, H Rider Haggard*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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EDITORIAL

This week, one of the spirits of the dead gazes upon pure, uncorrupted beauty. A pickpocket fools Death but is faced with the dreary prospect of immortality. And four starving refugees find horror in a lonely house deep in the wilds.

Ward's blood is up as the Battle for Callisto rages. We hear the shocking tale of The Death's Head in the latest Tale of the Dead. A new chapter begins for the settlers as they begin to learn the secret of Lincoln Island. And Olaf sets free the Iconoclast Bishop.

—Gavin Chappell

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A ROMANCE by Joseph J Patchen

The dead have congregated in the trees. They hide behind the leaves. They move about in the breeze. They seek out the rot. They seek out what is decaying and broken. It is their kith and their kin.

I know as I am one.

Random mummified remains, whole bodies and in parts, long ago rendered inactive by their own dead souls confined into deep sleep drip down from the softer and smaller branches to cover the moss below before they are swept away by the wind to float on the nearby placid waters.

Empty husks; all are brittle to the softest touch. Each will float and yet none will soak. They will just be before they no longer will be.

Death and dead; a state so differently spent. Each of us will strive to be such; all dead and happy in a spiritual repose as we decompose.

It is quiet now. There are no more ceremonies. There are no more sombre visits. The memories are found empty and forgotten. The memories are hollow and no longer draw importance. This side of the cemetery is old and filled. This side of the bone yard is nothing but a mixture of soil and dust.

This side is never touched.

Many of our stones are leaning and crumbling. Many more are broken in twos or threes. All litter the misshapen earth where the dirt sags and sinks where our coffins used to be.

Most slabs are blank or drenched in mould fuelled from the shadows of overgrown trees and brush. The grass is high with the tips of wildflowers suffocated by spider webs and bug casings.

There is nothing left below. Nothing left for us to allow for slumber. The rats and worms, the maggots and the beetles, they have eaten us through. We have no place to sleep. We have no container to rest and no marker to memorialize. We might as well be anonymous. We might as well have never been.

The meaning of life I surmise is simply loss. Time and blood drained from the moment of birth; loss. Experiences are fleeting, floating away as are the memories lost in time and disease; loss. People come and go with nothing permanent in between. It is all loss.

We congregate in the trees with our bodies lost and our spirits fading in the wind. We congregate in the trees for no other purpose than to see what was and what will never ever be.

On the other side where the green outshines the granite, there is a large party of mourners today.

They have collected and huddled around by the mausoleums; by the stone collection spaces designed to inhibit the rot. They are young and old. They are emotional and in denial. They are burying their young is the message I read on their tears.

The sun seems to stop on their moment. The sun glistens on the marble, blinding from every angle. Even God is focused and wondering how someone so youthful could have lost their spark.

The coffin is small, so tiny and in white. The handles are gold and the plate is scrolled in blue.

I am curious to see the child within. I am curious to know how the youth was spent. I am curious to touch the flesh so supple and to stroke the locks that adorn the innocent face.

I am intrigued with the physical form.

I wait until the roses stop mounting. I wait until the workers seal the stone. I wait as I have waited for decades and days for my wants and wishes, for my desires and dreams to bring me something of meaning and for someone I can call my own.

Before the sun can bow in slumber; before the stars can rise and spy from on high. I caress the smooth sleek marble. I can glide against its surface. I can feel the warmth it has collected and the cold it contains within.

The marble tile just closed and sealed is brittle to my actual touch. It shatters effortlessly and silently. The white container within glows with a soft encompassing aura that is both dull and failing.

I have come in time. I have come to rescue the soul before it spirals into the depression of mummified death.

The coffin is light and pleasing to the touch. It is neither cold nor warm. It is supple as the skin within. It is soft leather housing for a young girl within.

Time has stopped. The sun and moon are suspended as I gaze upon the pure beauty uncorrupted. I stumble back as I have never seen one so pure, one so pristine.

I reach out toward her with humble admiration. I reach out to her with a heart beating still.

She reminds me of one, or two but not many. She reminds me of the pure enjoyment I had in life.

Cascading red hair, eyes so wide and green; with skin of alabaster...oh my true love, let me tell you what I now foresee.

Awash in white lace, pure as the first ever snow. You will melt with me tonight in our honeymoon's glow.

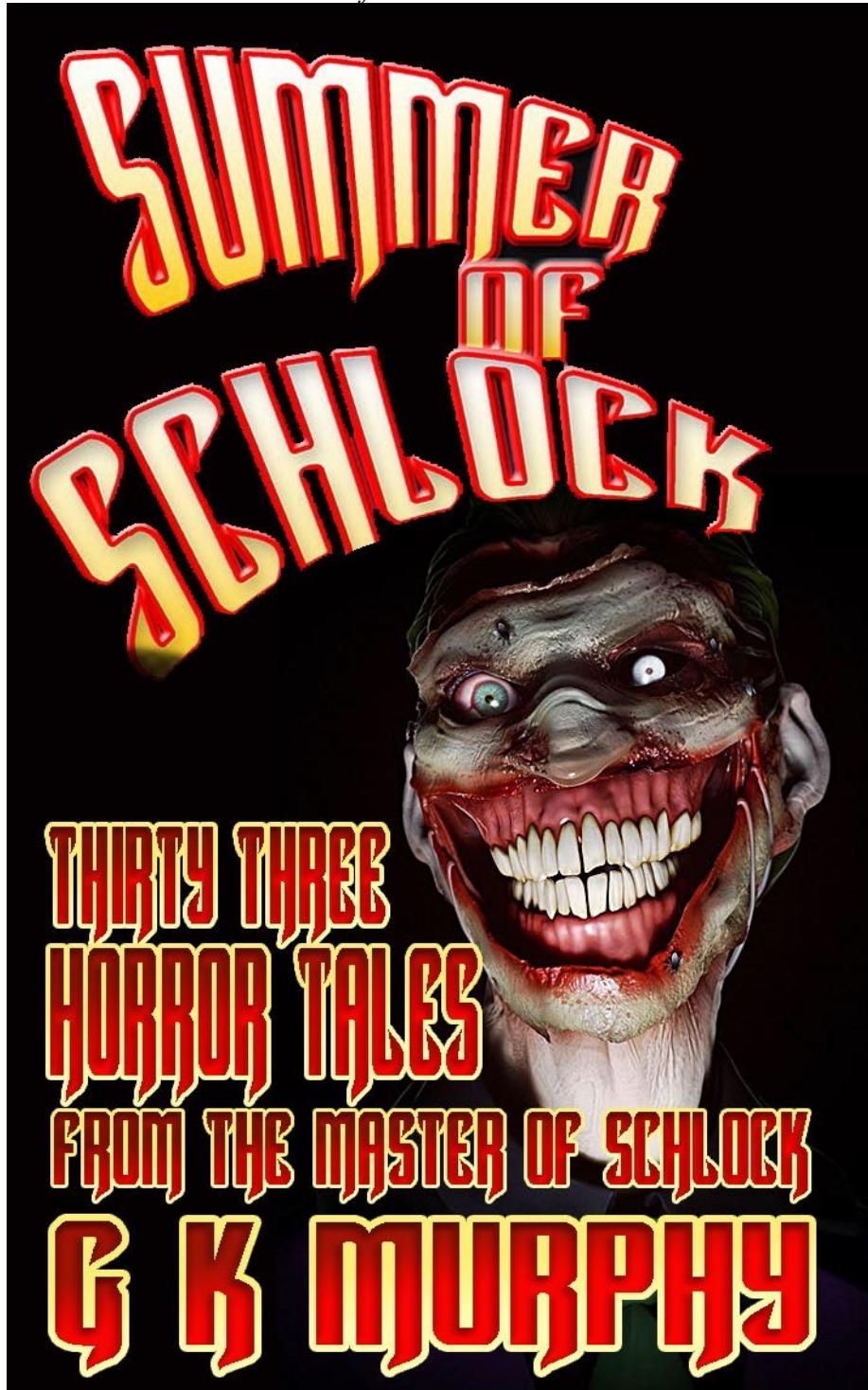
Silently resting you will clench your breast. Satisfied now that our love you did test.

A silken red pillow frames your sweet doll like head.

I only wish you were sleeping and we were not really dead.

THE END

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A MEETING WITH DEATH by Steven Havelock

Jim was immortal. It was a feat which he had achieved more by luck and accident than design...but now after countless decades he was weary...

Jim West was older than most people would believe if he had told them.

I am so, so weary, weary beyond imagining. My body is wracked with pain and it stopped obeying my commands several years ago. It is only with great effort that I can make the smallest movements.

All my friends and family have aged and died. I am all alone. All alone in a world that I can't understand or make sense of. The internet, cash and pin machines, electronic currencies...all baffle me. I am from a different, simpler time.

Pain started to flood his body once more and he injected the morphine into his blood stream through a cannula.

On this hot night he sat in his Spanish villa, in the middle of a pentagram, each of the five points of the pentagram had a candle...burning slowly in the warm night air.

Tonight, I will summon Death and be free of this accursed pain wracked body. Tonight, I will finally find peace.

One hundred and fifty years earlier

Jim West was a pick-pocket. Not any old pick-pocket, but one of the best in the world. However today was not going to be his day. As today he would die. He walked down the street on his way home from work. A gust of wind suddenly came out of nowhere dislodging a piece of granite masonry of the roof of a building that Jim was walking under.

The masonry, almost imperceptibly fell towards Jim. He looked up and saw it at the last minute.

Oh God! Not like this!

Jim disappeared under the block of masonry and as the dust settled, the stunned onlookers seemed to come to life.

“Quick, call an ambulance!” A woman with a pram shouted.

“No point, he’s dead!” a man said.

Time seemed to pause for Jim. He looked to his right and saw a dark shroud.

“Damn!” Death said. “I messed up. In my haste, I read the time of death wrong.”

“What...wha...Am I dead?” asked Jim.

“Yes and no, you are dead now but I read your time of death incorrectly from my death list. I have to let you go, you shall live once more.”

A few moments later an ambulance arrived. Then two burly paramedics removed the masonry and used a defibrillator to shock Jim’s heart, once...twice...three times.

“I got a pulse!” shouted one of the paramedics with joy.

Jim was hoisted into the ambulance by the professional and experienced paramedics in just a few seconds. He heard the ambulance’s siren sound as they transported him to the hospital.

Alone and lying on a portable stretcher bed, he pulled something from his pocket and a smile spread across his face.

I pick-pocketed death!

He looked at the book and turned to the last page and found his name. He ripped out the page jubilantly.

I’m going to live forever!

That night in the dark of the hospital room, Jim was awoken. He looked up from his pillow and saw a dark shadow.

Thief!

“I’m sorry...I’m so, so sorry, Death!”

“Give me back my death book!”

Jim—white faced—pulled a small black book from under his pillow.

The dark shadow took it and melted into the darkness of the room in an instant.

A small conniving smile spread across Jim’s face.

I’ve done it! I fooled death! I am now immortal!

Present Day

A dark shadow appeared from the darkness.

“Why have you summoned me hear?”

“Come closer, Death...there is something I want to tell you.”

Death came closer.

“What is it, mortal?”

“God, you are a stupid brute!”

“You insult me! I will enjoy claiming your soul when your time of death comes.”

The shadows disappeared into the darkness.

Stupid fool.

Jim was over a hundred and fifty years old, but in his hour of need his skill hadn't deserted him.

He pulled out Death's death book and turned to the last page. He pulled out a pen and wrote his name and next to it his time of death.

In the morning after the candles had burnt down to their embers.

Jim watched his last sunrise with soft, contemplative silence and a sad weary smile on his face. Then a dark shape seemed to form from the shadows around him.

“Foolish human! Return my book!”

Jim handed over the book.

Death turned to the next page and there was a smile of glee on his features.

“Your death is next, mortal!”

Stupid fool, I tricked him not once but twice.

Death lifted his scythe and couldn't work out why Jim was smiling as he brought down the scythe and released Jim's soul from his mortal body.

THE END

SPRING 2017

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QUEST FOR FOOD by Gavin Chappell

Gerald sat dolefully by the fire. The winds of early morning howled about the sandy hollow they had chosen for their campsite. In the distance, beyond the screen of bushes, the rumble of refugee carts on the highway was still audible.

‘She’s gone,’ he said.

‘Never mind your slapper,’ said Percy sharply. He was checking the snares they had set before going to sleep last night. ‘We’ve got no fuckin’ food.’

‘No food?’ Brian demanded. ‘I’m starving.’

‘I’m hungry too,’ Norman said. He looked dreamy. ‘When I was with the strolling players we had this marvellous banquet put on by one of our patrons, at his manor up in the hills. There was chicken and turkey and beef and all kinds of veg, all in delicious sauces...’

‘Shut it, fuckwit,’ Percy said brutally. He glared at the others. ‘What’s up with you lot? We’re gonna starve unless we find some kind of food.’

Gerald roused himself from his own reverie.

‘Can’t we go back to the city?’ He glanced at the black column of smoke that billowed on the northern horizon. ‘There shouldn’t be anyone to stop us taking what we like.’

Percy shook his head.

‘Only the barbarian hordes,’ he replied. ‘They’ll still be roaming the place. We can’t go back there.’

‘Well, we won’t get much out in the wilderness,’ Norman said. ‘All the same, we’ll be safe from the barbarians.’

Brian dribbled. ‘Why don’t we try hunting?’ he demanded. ‘We don’t need to buy our food. We can hunt it down.’

Percy indicated the empty snares. ‘We tried trapping, fool,’ he said in irritation. He broke off as a series of shouts and screams rang out from beyond the hollow.

‘What’s that?’ Norman asked.

Gerald looked at Percy. Percy turned, and headed for the screen of bushes in a crouching run. The other three followed him stealthily.

Through the frame of branches and leaves, they had an unrivalled view of the valley below, and the great thoroughfare winding down it that Immiel had called the Wagon Road. The highway was choked with traffic as the fleeing refugees headed south. Carts and wagons

packed with people and their belongings, including cupboards and bedspreads and antique statues, rumbled down the stone-paved road. A contingent of blue-haired barbarian warriors was riding down from the hills on the far side of the vale, silhouetted against a faint morning sky besmirched by the thick black column of smoke that marked the guttering city of Kashamash.

The vanguard reached the refugee column. They hacked about them with swords and axes; helpless refugees fell to the brutal attack and wagons went up in flame as the barbarians torched them. It swiftly became an ugly scene of slaughter.

The four youths withdrew into the safety of their hollow. Brian patted the haft of his trusty bastard sword. 'If any of those barbarians come near me,' he muttered, 'I'll sort them out.'

Percy looked at Gerald. 'This place is too dangerous for us,' he said. 'I think we'd better head away from the road.'

'What about food?' asked Norman snidely.

Percy thumped him.

'We'll find it where we can,' he replied.

They grabbed their packs and bedding from their hastily constructed bivouac, checked their weapons, and headed north east, out of the hollow.

This led them through a wilderness of thorn thickets that covered an otherwise barren plain. The scrub towered over the heads of the four youths as they followed a winding path through the spiky bushes. In the far distance, framed by ugly, withered boughs, grey mountains etched the distant horizon.

In silence, the four youths plodded onwards. The gravelly soil crunched beneath their feet. To their rear, the clamour of slaughter grew to a climax, and then faded with distance. Occasional glances Gerald threw over his shoulder revealed the column of smoke from Kashamash still climbing to the skies.

At midday, they camped in another gravelly hollow, out of the iced winds, and dismally regarded the stale loaf Norman had produced, under pressure, from his pack. It was crazy, Gerald thought. Only ten or so miles from the big city, and they were already starving. They munched unenthusiastically on the hard bread, and lay back for a while.

Dark hawks circled in the sky above them, sinister and ominous beyond the harsh tracery of thorn branches.

Finally, Gerald could stand it no longer. He rose, and shouldered his pack again.

‘Come on,’ he muttered fiercely. He was uncomfortable just sitting around. He wanted to be up and doing.

‘We need food,’ Percy said as the other three picked up their belongings and followed Gerald into the depths of the thorns.

Razor-sharp barbs tore at their clothes as they forced their way through the inhospitable scrub. After a quarter of an hour, Gerald was relieved to see pine trees waving above the tops of the thorn thickets. He quickened his pace, ignoring the grasping thorns that seemed intent on dragging him back, keeping him forever in this prickly labyrinth.

At last, they tore their way through the thorns and trod the muffling carpet of needles that lay beneath the towering pines. Now their passage was easier, although the forest floor seemed as barren as the gravel where the thorns grew. Then Gerald’s ears caught a distant trickling sound ahead. Shouldering their packs more firmly, the four youths forced their way along the silent paths of the forest.

Suddenly they were out of the trees and on a grassy bank leading down to a rushing stream. On the far side, the dark green forest wall loomed. But above them, they could see blue sky.

Gerald staggered through the rushes that fringed the bank and reached the edge of the stream. He knelt down, aware of the others at his side, and plunged his hands into the cold waters. Greedily he scooped up a handful of water and thrust it to his mouth. He repeated this until at last his dry throat was quenched.

They sat beside the stream for a while, cooling their feet in its waters and resting against their packs. Far from the sacking of cities and the slaughter of fleeing peoples, they could rest and revive themselves. Deep in the forest, they were safe. So they hoped.

Still the forest wall brooded on the far side of the stream.

‘What now?’ Norman asked.

Gerald opened a lazy eyelid. ‘What do you mean?’ he asked.

‘We need food,’ Percy reminded them sleepily.

‘That’s what I mean,’ Norman added. ‘I’m still starving.’

Little came between Norman and his belly, except his mouth, Gerald reflected. ‘Where’s Brian?’ he asked suddenly.

Percy and Norman looked about. No sign of the twerp, but his bastard sword lay on the ground nearby.

‘Don’t tell me the little fucker’s fucked off,’ Percy growled.

‘First Immiel, now Brian,’ Gerald said. ‘I know which one I’d prefer.’

‘Don’t worry, guys,’ Brian cried as he appeared from the trees on the far side. ‘I’m back.’ He splashed enthusiastically across the stream towards them.

‘Where the fuck have you been?’ Percy demanded.

‘Exploring,’ Brian said, ‘and I’ve found a house!’

‘A house?’ Gerald demanded derisively. ‘Out here?’

‘Yeah,’ said Brian. ‘And fuckin’ hell, is it a house! It’s a fuckin’ mansion!’

‘Out here?’ Norman echoed Gerald.

Brian wagged his head energetically. ‘Probably belongs to some evil sorcerer, who summoned up demons and zombies to build it in the middle of the wilderness,’ he said off-handedly. ‘We’re bound to find food there. Come on—follow me!’ He grabbed his bastard sword and plunged back across the stream.

Grumbling, the others got back to their feet.

‘You could be right,’ Gerald acknowledged, looking dubiously at Brian. ‘Alright, we’ll take a look at it. I think we can leave our stuff here.’

Leaving their packs in a pile beside the bank, they splashed across the stream towards the brooding forest wall. The springy grass on this side of the river felt pleasant beneath their feet. Entering the pines, they made their way across a carpet of pine needles, above which the trees rose, sighing morosely in the slight breeze. After a few minutes’ travel, the mansion appeared.

It stood alone in a wide clearing amidst the trees, surrounded by gardens planted with laurel and box, its marble and porphyry walls rising above the trees. A tower stood at one end. Glass windows glittered in the walls like malignant eyes.

They crouched at the edge of the trees and spoke in whispers.

‘Who d’you reckon lives there?’ Norman asked.

‘Dunno,’ said Percy.

Gerald regarded the prodigy thoughtfully. Maybe Brian’s hypothesis was true. ‘Careful,’ he warned. ‘This could be dangerous.’

Brian’s stomach rumbled pointedly.

‘I’m starving,’ Norman added.

Gerald brushed his hair out of his eyes. He was hungry too. Still, it would be a bit shit if they all came out of this transformed into toads. ‘Well, no one’s about,’ he conceded. ‘Come on, lads.’

They shuffled from the cover of the trees and crossed the well-manicured lawns and gravel paths. Soon they stood before the walls of the mansion and no one had challenged them. An eerie atmosphere hung over the whole place.

Percy broke it abruptly by smashing the nearest window.

Gerald stared bulging-eyed at him, while Norman and Brian glared about them in panic. ‘Fuckhead!’ Gerald said savagely. ‘That’ll be heard for miles!’

Percy was gazing in through the window. ‘As if anyone’s there to hear it,’ he said absently. He cleared away the panes of glass and heaved himself up. He looked back at the others. ‘Wankers,’ he crowed. ‘There’s no one here.’ He swung himself into the room beyond.

Gerald looked about him. Behind them, the trees were a dark wall.

‘Alright,’ he said. He followed Percy through the broken window, and Norman and Brian came after him.

Inside they found a wide atrium. Ahead, a colonnade opened out into a sunken garden. To left and right, doors led into other parts of the house. Plumply upholstered furniture and marble statues were scattered about the lavishly furnished room.

‘Where’s the kitchen?’ Percy asked.

As he turned to the others, Gerald saw the statue beside him creak into life. Percy frowned as the others gibbered at him.

‘What’s up?’ he demanded, his heart sinking, though he didn’t know why. ‘What’s...?’

He saw the shadow loom over him. He ducked and spun round, raising his sword to meet the blow from the marble mace clutched by the animated statue.

With a ringing sound, the metal blade shattered while the statue’s weapon continued, swinging silently through the air to smash a small occasional table.

‘Fuckin’ hell!’ Percy exclaimed. ‘It’s alive.’

At that moment, the three other statues, each at opposite corners of the room, came alive, and lumbered towards the intruders.

‘This way!’ Gerald exclaimed, and led them in a rush towards the left-hand wall. The two closest statues corrected their advance, grinding as they turned to intercept the youths. Stone clubs whizzed dangerously through the air as the statues converged on them.

Gerald threw open the door and the youths piled into the next room. With a glower at their pursuers, Gerald slammed the door shut.

They found themselves in a hallway. To their left they could see the front door, an imposing portico that led out to a gravel drive, dimly visible through frosted grass. To their right a door led into the atrium. Beside it was a wide flight of steps leading upwards, beneath which another flight led down.

The statues began smashing at the door behind them.

‘Let’s get moving,’ Percy suggested.

‘We need food!’ Norman complained.

‘Let’s try down here,’ Percy said, indicating the steps leading downwards. ‘They’ll probably keep food in the cellar.’

‘But...’ Gerald pitched in.

The door behind them was shuddering under the repeated blows of the statues. ‘Hurry up!’ Percy said. He led them down the steps.

As Percy had predicted, they led to a dank cellar, whose walls were furred with moss and lined with barrels. Brian sprinted to one barrel, and turned the tap that protruded from its base. Red liquid gushed forth across the flags, and he put his mouth to it.

Gerald grabbed him and pulled him away. The youth was scowling. ‘Ugh, it’s all salty,’ he complained. Gerald stared in apprehension at the red stream spurting from the tap.

‘What’s up?’ Percy demanded. ‘Look—wine! Don’t drink it all, we might need to fight our way out of here.’

‘You drink it,’ said Gerald, looking green.

Percy stared at him. ‘What do you mean?’ he asked. ‘I’d prefer food, but...’

He bent to the tap, and recoiled as the first drops splattered into his mouth.

‘Urrrh!’ he exclaimed. There was a coppery stench in the air.

‘That smells like blood,’ said Norman.

‘Tastes like it too,’ said Percy, his face pale and sheened with sweat.

‘What’s through here?’ Gerald asked, indicating an archway in the nearby wall.

Brian strode through, and halted abruptly. The others followed. ‘I really hope this isn’t where they keep the food,’ Brian said, sounding unusually concerned.

In the middle of the small, cube-like room lay four putrid corpses. Their flesh writhed yellowy with maggots.

‘Guggh,’ Gerald vomited.

‘Urrrgh!’ was Percy’s contribution to the debate.

A heavy stamping sound of descent came from the steps behind them.

‘We’re trapped,’ Norman said brightly.

Of course, it was at precisely that moment that the rotting bodies chose to rise to their feet.

Percy grabbed at a non-existent sword hilt, then stared in horror at his empty sheath as the four corpses shambled towards them. Brian brandished his bastard sword and attacked the zombies.

‘Back this way,’ Gerald urged, indicating the arch into the main part of the cellar.

‘Are you fucked in the head?’ Percy inquired. ‘That’s where those statues are coming from!’

As if to confirm this, the flagstones immediately outside the arch reverberated with the heavy plod of stone feet. Norman joined Brian fending off the clumsy blows of the four zombies. Brian lopped the arms off one, but they still advanced.

Gerald made a few aimless chops at the animate corpses. Then Percy cried out incoherently from behind them.

Gerald spun round. Rearing in the archway were the four statues. Corpses, statues; everything in this fucking house was animated that shouldn’t be!

‘Attack!’ he shouted madly, and flung himself at the statues.

Ducking the sweeping blow of one, he threw himself to the cold stone floor and rolled under the stamping feet of the statues, out into the main part of the cellar, now sticky with the red liquid seeping out across it. He kicked the backside of the closest statue and sent it toppling into another of its companions. The four statues went down like dominoes, and Gerald’s companions rushed out.

The four of them sprinted across the wet, sticky floor. At the steps, Gerald looked back to see the statues had regained their footing and were locked in combat with the living dead.

Percy thumped his shoulder. 'Get moving,' he said. They hurried up the steps and out into the hallway.

'Where's the fuckin' kitchen?' Percy demanded.

'Try this way,' Brian suggested, leading them through a previously unnoticed door across the corridor.

It led into a dark room. Curtains across the windows cut out the bright sunlight. In its lieu, fat yellow candles guttered upon an altar in the centre of the room, and a brazier blazed beneath it, sending eerie shadows dancing across the face of a robed man who stood in the midst of a protective pentacle. His hair was long and greasy, his face hawk-like and cruel, his eyes cold and emerald blue. He looked sardonically at them.

'So it is ye who come to pilfer the last surviving copy of the Sauthenoneriom!' he snarled. 'Well, whoever sent ye, be warned—I am prepared!'

'No, mate,' said Percy. 'We're just looking for food.'

The sorcerer laughed. 'Lies!' he spat. 'I believe none of your words. Besides, it is immaterial. The great demon Gongfermors will destroy you.'

He gave a contemptuous flourish of his left wrist, casting dust over the fire on his altar. Before the four youths could react, a great multi-taloned, many-fanged figure burst from nowhere and flung itself at them.

Gongfermors was a blur of movement as it tore at them. Gerald faced it with his sword, parrying each blow of its savage claws. Brian and Norman stood at either side and hacked at the demon's sides. Ichor wept down its flanks but it fought on undeterred.

Percy crossed the dark room and appeared before the sorcerer. 'No, really, mate,' he begged. 'We just want a bite to eat.'

Eyes wide with terror, the sorcerer sprang back. 'Lies!' he insisted. 'Lies!'

Percy grabbed him by the neck of his robe and dragged him close. 'Now listen to me,' he said, as the noise of his friends' battle with the demon continued. 'We just want some food. We don't need no steenking Sauthenoneriom!'

Paying him no heed, the sorcerer scrabbled on the altar. His fingers closed on a wavy-bladed knife. He lifted it and aimed a wild blow at Percy. Percy fell back with blood leaking from his shoulder. He flung himself to one side as the sorcerer lunged at him again. Then with a

sudden lash of his right fist, he clouted the sorcerer over the ear. The man fell forward over his altar, sending it toppling. A scatter of sigils and talismans fell into the brazier.

Percy grabbed the knife as it clattered across the floor. The sorcerer rose, flinging himself at the youth, and Percy sank it into his kidneys. The sorcerer fell, a dead weight, across Percy's feet. Contemptuously Percy kicked his body aside and took stock of the situation.

Gerald, Norman, and Brian were staring at an indelible black shadow that stained the marble floor at their feet. As one, they looked up at him.

'The demon vanished back into hell when I slew its dark master,' Percy muttered.

There was a pause.

'Yer what?' Gerald inquired.

Percy looked at him in silence. 'Forget it,' he said at last, with a shrug. 'Let's find the kitchen.'

Norman tore back the dark, velvet curtains, and light filtered into the room, transforming it into a sedate bourgeois sitting room. On the far side there was a door.

Percy opened the door. Beyond they saw a well-lit kitchen. The four youths rushed through and began to ransack the well-stocked cupboards, shoving bottles and jars and vegetables and hunks of meat into their packs.

'Now we've got food,' Gerald asked, 'what do we do? Just keep wandering?' He really wanted to find Immiel. Where had she gone? She'd said she wanted to come with them.

Percy looked thoughtful. 'Remember what the dwarves told us about the sorceress Photogeneia?' he said. 'She could get us out of this world, he said. I reckon we concentrate on looking for her, like we decided.'

'Why?' Brian grumbled. 'This place is better than school...'

'Far across the Wastelands of Barbary,' Gerald said, staring into the distance. 'It'll be a long journey, full of danger...'

'Some of us might not even survive,' said Norman mournfully.

'Let's do it, then!' Brian exclaimed. 'Come on!'

On the left-hand wall of the kitchen, a door led out into a herb garden. They piled out and found themselves only yards from the drive, which led through an avenue of cypress trees and down onto a winding dusty track that led to the north and south.

As they stood there, alternately debating on the direction in which to go and stuffing their faces with food, the four youths heard a thunderous crash from behind them. Whirling round, they turned to peer up the drive. Percy saw that the front door of the sorcerer's house had been battered open. Four animated statues stood in the portico, their stone heads casting back and forth. They caught sight of the four adventurers, and began stumbling down the drive.

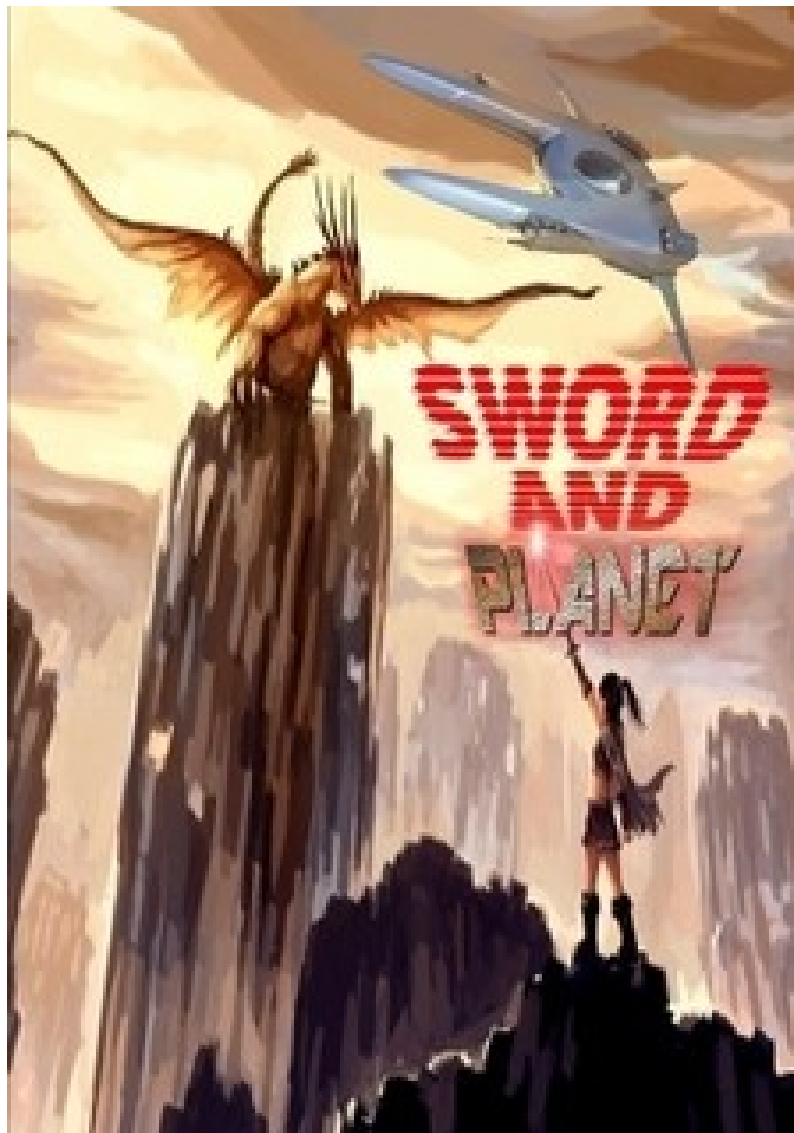
'Oh fuck,' said Percy.

'This way!' said Gerald.

They sprinted down the drive, weighed down by packs bulging with stolen food. Behind them, the rocky tread of the animated statues grew louder.

THE END.

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THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO by Gregory KH Bryant

Episode Fifteen

“Sir? We have lost Lieutenant Hardy,” the adjutant told Colonel Westland.

Westland did not take his eyes from the scanners. Both men stood in the command deck of the “Bellerophon”.

“Lost?” Westland asked. There was no emotion in his voice.

“No contact, sir. After his last manoeuvre, we lost contact. He broke the first wave of hostiles, but after that, we lose him.”

Westland clenched his jaw.

“Noted,” he said. “Let me know, soon as you hear anything from him.”

“Yes, sir,” the adjutant answered.

“We’ve got a second wave incoming,” Westland said. “Put Lieutenant Yarker in command of defence. Have her lead the next contingent to meet this wave coming in.”

“Yes sir,” the adjutant said.

He spun on his heel, returned to his console at the far end of the command deck, and relayed Colonel Westland’s orders.

Westland stood immobile. He studied the dozens of screens and scanners arrayed upon the bulkheads and the ceiling. It was not these first waves of fighters that troubled him. He was sure that the “Bellerophon’s” defences could take care of them. For now, they were only nuisances, hornets with their stingers.

It was those two larger ships, large interplanetary transports, that he didn’t like.

Two of them. One of them long in shape, and nearly the length of the “Bellerophon” itself. The other was made up of ten large spheres bound together in the shape of a pyramid.

“One of these must be the ‘Grand Marquis’,” Westland said, more to himself than to anyone standing nearby. “Which one?”

Though he searched the registries of two planets, and several of the larger asteroids, he found nothing on these two ships. No records, no data, no references, nothing.

He didn’t like that. He had no way to know their combat effectiveness, their firepower. He’d just have to see.

It also meant that these Scroungers were a bigger menace than anyone on Earth or Mars had appreciated. Where had they found the resources to build these big ships? For all the

intelligence services of two planets could say, the Scroungers were limited to small hijacked ships, with crews of twenty to maybe fifty hands.

Westland ordered the “Bellerophon’s” scanners to continuously scan every surface of the two ships, which was quickly done. Data was returned quickly, and just as quickly, Westland forwarded everything that came to him to Earth Space Forces, back on Earth.

“Tell Yarker to look smart. We’re going to set some mines,” Westland said. “Pulse mines. Place them directly over Callisto Base 1.”

“Sir,” the adjutant answered. “Yes, sir.”

Westland studied the holographic map of Callisto with Callisto Base 1 in the foreground.

“Wish we had more time. Checkerboard configuration. A hundred mines.”

“Yes, sir. Begin launch...”

“Now,” Westland said.

The adjutant launched the mines.

They spilled out from the last pod of the half-mile long “Bellerophon” looking tiny against the huge ship. And quickly did the tiny mines, mere slivers of light, organize themselves into a formation as they fell out of the ship.

In rows of ten by ten they composed a square of a hundred mines, each one no larger than a man’s head, but each one with a capacity to send a pulse through any substance, metal, plastic, synth, whatever, a pulse that caused the heart to spasm and convulse, creating a heart attack in any living thing.

They separated themselves to a distance of ten miles from each to each, creating between them a deadly space, one through which no ship with a crew could pass, nor even come near.

“They’ll have to go around,” Westland said to no one in particular. “Not the best defence for Callisto Base 1, but it’s something.”

Mud shook his head as he followed Ward.

Yeah, Ward’s blood was up. That was obvious. And when Ward’s blood was up, there was just no reasoning with the man. Forget about stopping him. Just go along and try to keep him from getting his head exploded or something. Or stay the hell away from him. Because when Ward was in the grip of his bloodlust he was just barely sane. Mud learned that about Ward when they served in the Martian Rangers together. In combat, the man was just deadly.

Ward had told him about Mokem Bet. Told him how Mokem Bet had slashed Ward’s throat, and how Dimara had only narrowly closed up the wound in time to keep Ward alive.

Yeah, sure. That was enough to righteously piss off any man. And Ward was rightly and righteously pissed off at Mokem Bet. But it wasn't the mere throat-cutting that had put Ward in this blood rage.

At first, as Mud and Ward hung out on Callisto, waiting for the day when they'd take off with Hardy and Westland against the Scroungers, Mud had assumed that it had been Illara who put that softness he'd seen in Ward's eye. Yeah, let a man cosy up with a chick, and he goes soft. They all do. But no, it wasn't Illara made Ward a sissy.

Nope.

She was a fine piece of womanhood, that Illara, and woman enough to make a pet out of any man. But it wasn't her, made Ward go a little soft.

It was that kid. That Emily kid, the one that Ward had shipped out of Mars with her family. She's the one who managed to peel back a bit of Ward's armour. Sure, Mud was grateful to the kid for that. Made Ward human. Warmed him up a bit. Made conversation with him just a bit more interesting.

But out here, that was dangerous. Even among the space rats, most of them shipped with a companion or two, or three, or more. Men like Mud and Ward, who shipped from planet to asteroid alone, who craved their solitude, were rare. Living alone among the asteroids in small planet-hopping ships was dangerous as all hell, and they had to be hard, real hard to survive it.

Mud listened intently as Ward had talked about Emily, through those long hours on Callisto while they waited to hear the call from the "Bellerophon".

And Mud understood exactly why Ward was so intent on killing Mokem Bet. He understood the obscene threats that Mokem Bet had levelled at both Illara and Emily. He understood the rage that burned in Ward's eyes and in his heart against the man who promised them both lifetimes as his sex slaves.

No, Ward wasn't out to kill Mokem Bet for the sake of revenge against a cut throat. He was going to kill Mokem Bet for Emily's sake. And then again, for Illara. And then, only after that, was he going to indulge his own quest for revenge.

It was just like the man, who had so little regard for his own life, to hurl his ship at the "Grand Marquis", and to board it, alone, in his hunt for the man he had sworn to kill.

And all Mud could do was tag along and try to keep his old friend from getting himself splattered all over the bulkheads of the "Grand Marquis".

Besides, it promised to be a helluva good show, and Mud damn sure didn't want to miss it.

With EMPs bursting all around them and narrowly missing them, Ward bore down on the "Grand Marquis" in his 08-111A, aiming his ship at the plasma walls through which Turhan Mot's fleet were launching against the "Bellerophon".

Ward and Mud enjoyed an advantage over the Scroungers and their gunners. Their ships, the O8-111A and the “Charon”, were both highly manoeuvrable. Having carefully cultivated the contacts they first made during their tour with the Martian Rangers, they had their pick of the most recent technologies developed by Deimos Labs, the suppliers to Earth Space Forces of their most advanced weaponry.

The Scroungers had to rely on equipment stolen from ships they’d hijacked, and were, therefore, always one or two generations behind the latest developments. So Ward and Mud found it a relatively easy matter to elude the barrages fired at them by Turhan Mot’s gunners.

Several of the EMPs fired at Ward and Mud missed them, striking against the small fighter ships that were on their way against the “Bellerophon”. At such close range, the EMP bursts were deadly, and they put the ships they hit instantly out of service. The dead hulks of ships plummeted forward, uncontrolled and uncontrollable. They ploughed into other ships, sewing confusion in the attacking force.

A confusion that Ward and Mud were quick to exploit.

For his part, Mud fired into the knot of confused ships, hitting them with plasma bursts that caused the ships to partially disintegrate. The pilots and gunners of those ships found themselves embarrassed, flung from what was left of their small fighter craft, and spinning, without suits, into space.

Some of them were to remain in orbit around Callisto for many years before finally crashing into the moon’s surface, while others were hurled into space where they drifted among Jupiter’s faint rings before finally escaping the gravitational well of the gas giant, and becoming permanent features of the Solar System.

Which confusion threw Turhan Mot into a confused, but yet controlled fury. He ordered his gunners to step up their barrages against the O8-111A and Mud’s ship, the “Charon” without regard for his own swiftly departing fleet. But Ward and Mud easily eluded the scattershot barrages while Turhan Mot’s ships, not expecting any such assault from their own commander, took many hits.

Yamir watched all this closely from the command deck of his own ship, the “Reliant”. It was the first time he had the chance to observe Turhan Mot in combat. He was not impressed.

That Turhan Mot should allow two such tiny ships to approach so closely to his own, that he should permit them to sew such confusion among his own fighters, indeed, that he was willing to sacrifice so many of his own fighters to his own incompetent barrage - all these things brought Yamir’s already tentative regard for the man to entirely new lows.

“Let us keep our distance from the ‘Grand Marquis’,” he said to his pilot and his navigator. “Their captain seems to me unsure of his footing, nor do I care for my ship or my crew to be near him, when he falls.”

“Aye, my captain,” his pilot answered.

“While he dawdles with his toys,” Yamir continued, “Let us move ahead. Let us engage the “Bellerophon”.”

“Aye, my captain,” the pilot said. He pushed the “Reliant” forward and upward, over the mine field that “Bellerophon” was at that moment deploying in the sky, above Callisto Base 1.

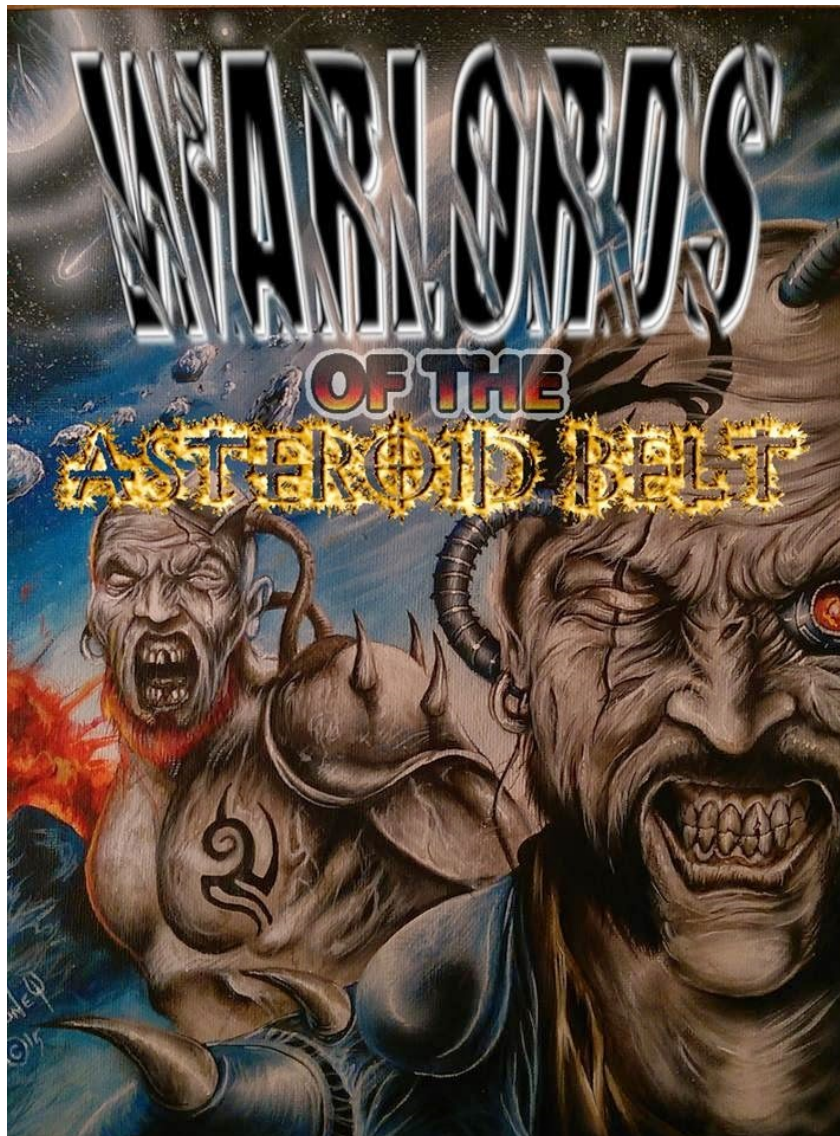
Colonel Westland, aboard the “Bellerophon” saw the “Reliant” pulling away from the fleet and picking up speed.

He studied it carefully on the monitors, his eyes taking in every detail.

“On your toes, boys and girls. Big guns are coming.”

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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



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TALES OF THE DEAD: THE DEATH'S HEAD by Johann August Apel

—— “What guilt
Can equal violations of the dead?
The dead how sacred!” ——

YOUNG'S NIGHT THOUGHTS

The beauty of the evening which succeeded to a very sultry day tempted colonel Kielholm to sit, surrounded by his little family, on the stone bench placed before the door of the noble mansion he had recently purchased. In order to become acquainted by degrees with his new tenants, he took pleasure in questioning on their occupations and conditions the greater part of those who passed by; he alleviated their little sufferings by his advice as well as by his bounty. His family enjoyed particular pleasure in seeing the little inn situated in front of the château, which, instead of presenting a disgusting object, as when the late owner lived there, became each succeeding day better and more orderly. Their pleasure was heightened from the circumstance that the new landlord, who had been many years a servant in the family, was loud in praises of its amended condition, and delighted himself in his new calling, with the idea of the happy prospects it held forth to himself, his wife, and children.

Formerly, though the road was greatly frequented, nobody ventured to pass a night at this inn; but now each day there was a succession of travellers; carriages were constantly seen at the door or in the court-yard; and the air of general satisfaction of each party as they proceeded on their route, incontestably proved to the landlord, (who always, hat in hand, was at the door of their carriages as they drove off,) that his efforts to give the various travellers satisfaction were completely successful.

A moving scene of this nature had just disappeared, which furnished conversation for the moment, when a whimsical equipage, which arrived from another quarter, attracted the attention of the colonel and his family. A long carriage, loaded with trunks and all sorts of luggage, and drawn by two horses, whose form and colour presented the most grotesque contrast imaginable, but which in point of meagreness were an excellent match, was succeeded by a second long and large vehicle, which they had, most probably at the expense of the adjacent forest, converted into a travelling thicket. The four steeds which drew it, did not in any respect make a better appearance than the two preceding. But the colonel and his family were still more struck by the individuals who filled this second carriage: it was a strange medley of children and grown persons, closely wedged together; but not one of their countenances bore the slightest mark of similarity of ideas. Discontent, aversion, and hatred, were legible in the face of each of these sunburnt strangers. It was not a family, but a collection of individuals which fear or necessity kept together without uniting.

The colonel's penetrating eye led him to discover thus much, though the distance was considerable. He at length saw descend from the back part of the carriage a man of better appearance than the others. At something which he said, the whole troop turned their eyes towards the inn; they assumed an air of greater content, and appeared a little better satisfied.

The first carriage had already stopped at the door of the inn, while the second was passing the château; and the extremely humble salutations from the passengers in the latter, seemed to claim the goodwill of the colonel and his family.

The second carriage had scarcely stopped, ere the troop were out of it, each appearing anxious to quit those next to whom they had been sitting with all possible speed. The spruce and agile manner in which they leapt out of the vehicle, left no doubt on the mind what their profession was, — they could be none other than rope-dancers.

The colonel remarked, that “notwithstanding the humble salutations they had made, he did not think they would exhibit in these parts; but according to appearances they would proceed to the capital with all possible dispatch; as it was hardly to be expected that they would be delayed a single day, by the very trivial profit to be expected from exhibiting in a mere country village.”

“We have,” said he, “seen the worst side of these gentry, without the probability of ascertaining whether they have any thing to recommend them to our notice.”

His wife was on the point of expressing her dislike to all those tricks which endanger the neck, when the person whom they had observed as being superior to the rest, advanced towards them, and after making a low bow, asked permission to remain there a few days. The colonel was unable to refuse this request, as he shewed him a passport properly signed.

“I beg you,” replied the colonel, “to declare most positively to your company, that every equivocal action is punished in my villages; as I am anxious to avoid all possibility of quarrels.”

“Do not in the least alarm yourself, Monsieur; an extremely severe discipline is kept up in my troop, which has in some respects the effect of a secret police among ourselves: all can answer for one, and one can answer for all. Each is bound to communicate any misconduct on the part of another to me, and is always rewarded for such communication; but, on the contrary, if he omits so to do, he is severely punished.”

The colonel’s lady could not conceal her aversion to such a barbarous regulation; which the stranger perceiving, shrugged his shoulders.

“We must all accommodate our ideas to our condition. I have found, that if persons of this stamp are not so treated, there is no possibility of governing them. And you may the more confidently rely on my vigilance, as I had the happiness of being born in this place, and in consequence feel a double obligation: first, to the place of my birth; secondly, to his worship.”

“Were you born here?” demanded the colonel’s wife with surprise.

“Yes, my lady; my father was Schurster the schoolmaster, who died lately. But I call myself Calzolaro, finding that my profession succeeds better under an Italian than a German name.”

This explanation redoubled the interest the colonel and his lady already felt for this man, who appeared to have received a tolerable education. They knew that the schoolmaster, whose profession had been pretty lucrative, owing to the numerous population of the village, had died worth some considerable property; but that he had named a distant female relation as his sole heiress, leaving his only son an extremely scanty pittance.

“My father, continued Calzolaro, “did not behave to me as he ought: and I cannot but think I should be justified in availing myself of some important informalities in his will, and endeavouring to set it aside, which is my present intention. But excuse, I pray you, my having tired your patience with relations to which the conversation has involuntarily given rise. I have still one more request to make: Permit me to return you my best thanks for your gracious condescension, and to shew you some of the exercises for which my troop is famous.”

The colonel acceded to Calzolaro’s request, and a day was fixed for the performance.

Calzolaro went that very evening to the village pastor, and communicated to him his intentions relative to his father’s will. The worthy minister condemned such procedure, and endeavoured to convince Calzolaro that his father’s anger was just. “Picture to yourself, young man,” said he, “a father who has grown old in an honest profession, and who rejoices in having a son to whom he can leave it: added to which, this son has great talents, a good understanding, and is well-disposed. It was natural that the father should use every possible exertion to obtain for this son his own situation at his death. The son is in truth nominated to succeed him. The father, thinking himself secure from misfortune, feels quite happy. It was at this period that the son, enticed by hair-brained companions, gave up a certain and respectable, though not very brilliant provision. My dear Schurster, if, when shaking off the salutary yoke, and quitting your venerable father, to ramble over the world, you could lightly forget the misery it would occasion him, you ought at least in the present instance to behave differently; or, in plain terms, I shall say you are a good-for-nothing fellow. Did not your father, even after this, do all he could to reclaim you? but you were deaf to his remonstrances.”

“Because the connexion which I had formed imposed obligations on me, from which I could not free myself, as from a garment of which one is tired. For had I then been my own master, as I now am — “

“Here let us stop, if you please: I have only one request to make of you. You ought, from respect to your father’s memory, not to dispute his will.”

This conversation and the venerable air of the pastor had a little shaken Calzolaro’s resolutions: but the next day they returned with double force; for he heard several persons say, that shortly before his death, his father was heard to speak of him with great bitterness.

This discourse rendered him so indignant, that he would not even accede to a proposal of accommodation with the heiress, made to him by the pastor.

The colonel tried equally, but without success, to become a mediator, and at length determined to let the matter take its course.

He however assisted at the rehearsals made by the troop; and took so much pleasure in the performances prepared for the amusement of him and his family by Calzolaro, that he engaged him to act again, and invited several of his neighbours to witness them.

Calzolaro said to him on this occasion: "You have as yet seen very trifling proofs of our abilities. But do not fancy that I am an idle spectator, and merely stand by to criticize: — I, as well as each individual of my troop, have a sphere of action; and I reserve myself to give you, before we take our leave, some entertaining experiments in electricity and magnetism."

The colonel then told him, that he had recently seen in the capital a man who exhibited experiments of that sort, which had greatly delighted him; and above all, he had been singularly astonished by his powers of ventriloquism.

"It is precisely in that particular point," replied Calzolaro, [sic: no open quotation mark here] that I think myself equal to any one, be they whom they may."

"I am very glad of it," answered the colonel. "But what would produce the most astonishing effect on those who have never heard a ventriloquist, would be a dialogue between the actor and a death's head : — the man of whom I made mention gave us one."

"If you command it, I can undertake it."

"Delightful!" exclaimed the colonel. And Calzolaro having given some unequivocal proofs of his powers as a ventriloquist, the colonel added: "The horror of the scene must be augmented by every possible means: for instance, we must hang the room with black; the lights must be extinguished; we must fix on midnight. It will be a species of phantasmagoria dessert after supper; an unexpected spectacle. We must contrive to throw the audience into a cold perspiration, in order that when the explanation takes place they may have ample reason to laugh at their fears. For if all succeeds, no one will be exempt from a certain degree of terror."

Calzolaro entered into the project, and promised that nothing should be neglected to make it successful. — They unfurnished a closet, and hung it with black.

The colonel's wife was the only one admitted to their confidence, as they could rely on her discretion. Her husband had even a little altercation on the subject with her. She wished, that for the ventriloquist scene they should use the model of a head in plaister, which her son used to draw from; whereas the colonel maintained that they must have a real skull: "Otherwise," said he, "the spectators' illusion will speedily be at an end; but after they have heard the death's head speak, we will cause it to be handed round, in order to convince them that it is in truth but a skull."

“And where can we procure this skull?” asked the colonel’s wife.

“The sexton will undertake to provide us with it.”

“And whose corpse will you thus disturb, for a frivolous amusement?”

“How sentimental you are!” replied Kielholm, who did not consider the subject in so serious a light: “We may easily see you are not accustomed to the field of battle, where no further respect is paid to the repose of the dead, than suits the convenience of the labourer in the fields where they are buried.”

“God preserve me from such a spectacle!” exclaimed the colonel’s lady in quitting them, when she perceived her husband was insensible to her representations.

According to the orders which he received, the sexton one night brought a skull in good preservation.

The morning of the day destined for the representation, Calzolaro went into the adjacent forest to rehearse the dialogue which he was to have with the death’s head. He considered in what way to place the head, so as to avoid all suspicion of the answers given by it being uttered by a person concealed. In the mean while the pastor arrived at the spot from a neighbouring hamlet, where he had been called to attend a dying person: and believing that the interposition of Providence was visible in this accidental meeting, the good man stopped, in order once again to exhort Calzolaro to agree to an accommodation with the heiress.

“I yesterday,” said he, “received a letter from her, in which she declares that, rather than any disrespect should be paid to your father’s last will and testament, she will give up to you half the inheritance to which she is thereby entitled. Ought you not to prefer this to a process at law, the issue of which is doubtful, and which at all events will never do you credit?”

Calzolaro persisted in declaring that the law should decide between him and the testator —. The poor young man was not in a state to see in a proper point of view his father’s conduct towards him. — The pastor, finding all his representations and entreaties fruitless, left him. Calzolaro proceeded slowly to the inn, to assign to each of his band their particular part. He told them that he should not be with them; but notwithstanding he should have an eye over their conduct. He was not willing to appear as the manager of these mountebanks, to the party assembled at the colonel’s, thinking that if he appeared for the first time in the midnight scene, as an entire stranger, it would add still more to the marvellous.

The tumbler’s tricks and rope-dancing were performed to admiration. And those of the spectators whose constant residence in the country prevented their having witnessed similar feats, were the most inclined to admire and praise the agility of the troop. The little children in particular applauded. The compassion excited by their unhappy destiny, mingled with the approbation bestowed on them; and the ladies were subjects of envy, in giving birth to the satisfaction depicted in the countenances of these little wretches by their liberal donations.

The agility of the troop formed the subject of general conversation the whole afternoon. They were even speaking in their praise after supper, — when the master of the house said to the company assembled:

“I am rejoiced, my dear friends, to see the pleasure you have received from the little spectacle that I have been enabled to give you. My joy is so much the greater, since I find you doubting the possibility of things which are very natural; for I have it in my power to submit for your examination something of a very incomprehensible nature. At this very moment I have in my house a person who entertains a most singular intercourse with the world of spirits, and who can compel the dead to answer his questions.”

“O!” exclaimed a lady smiling, “don’t terrify us.”

“You jest now,” replied the colonel; “but I venture to affirm your mirth will be a little changed when the scene takes place.”

“I accept the challenge,” answered the incredulous fair one. All the party was of her opinion, and declared themselves so openly and so loudly against the truth of these terrific scenes, that the colonel began to be really apprehensive for the effects likely to be produced by those he had prepared. He would have even relinquished his project, if his guests, one and all, had not intreated him to the contrary. They even went further: they besought him not long to delay the wonderful things he promised. But the colonel, keeping his own counsel, feigned ignorance that they were laughing at him; and with a grave air declared that the experiment could not take place till midnight.

The clock at length struck twelve. The colonel gave his servants orders to place chairs facing the door of a closet which had been hitherto kept shut: he invited the company to sit down, and gave orders for all the lights to be put out. While these preparations were making, he thus addressed the company:

“I entreat you, my friends, to abstain from all idle curiosity.” The grave and solemn tone in which he uttered these words made a deep impression on the party, whose incredulity was not a little lessened by the striking of the clock, and the putting out the lights one after the other. Presently they heard from the closet facing them the hoarse and singular sounds by which it is pretended spirits are conjured up; and which were interrupted at intervals by loud strokes of a hammer. All on a sudden the door of the closet opened: and as by slow degrees the cloud of incense which filled it evaporated, they gradually discovered the black trappings with which it was hung, and an altar in the middle also hung with black drapery. On this altar was placed a skull, which cast its terrifying regards on all the company present.

Meanwhile the spectators’ breathing became more audible and difficult, and their embarrassment increased in proportion as the vapour gave place to a brilliant light issuing from an alabaster lamp suspended from the ceiling. Many of them indeed turned their heads away in alarm on hearing a noise behind them; which, however, they discovered simply proceeded from some of the servants, whom the colonel had given permission to be present during the exhibition, at a respectful distance.

After a moment of profound silence, Calzolaro entered. A long beard had so effectually altered his youthful appearance, that though several of the spectators had previously seen him, they could not possibly recognize him under this disguise. And his Oriental costume added so much to the deceit, that his entrance had an excellent effect.

In order that his art should impose the more, the colonel recommended to him a degree of haughtiness in addressing the company; and that he should not salute them according to any prescribed forms of politeness, but to announce himself in terms foreign from all ordinary modes of conversation. They both agreed that a mysterious jargon would best answer their purpose.

In consequence of such determination, Calzolaro, assuming a deep sepulchral tone, thus began: — “After our present state of existence, we are swallowed up in the obscure abyss which we call death, in order that we may become incorporated in an entirely new and peaceful state. It is in order to emancipate the soul from this state, that the sublime arts are exercised; and to create among fools and weak persons the idea of its being impossible! The wise and learned pity them for their ignorance, in not knowing what is possible and impossible, true or false, light or dark; because they do not know and cannot comprehend the exalted spirits, who, from the silence of the vault and the grave, from the mouldering bones of the dead, speak to the living in a voice no less formidable than true. As to you, who are now here assembled, listen to a word of advice: Avoid provoking by any indiscreet question the vengeance of the spirit, who at my command will be invisibly stationed beneath this human skull. Endeavour to moderate your fear: listen to everything with calmness and submission; for I take under my especial care all those who are obedient, and only leave the guilty as a prey to the destruction they merit.”

The colonel remarked with secret satisfaction the impression produced on the company, hitherto so incredulous, by this pompous harangue.

“Every thing succeeds better than I could have hoped,” said he, in an under tone to his wife, who was not at all amused by the performance, and who was only present to please her husband.

Meanwhile Calzolaro continued: “Look on this pitiful and neglected head: my magic art has removed the bolts of the tomb to which it was consigned, and in which reposes a long line of princes. The owner of it is now actually there, rendering up to the spirits an exact account of the life he had led. Don’t be alarmed, even though it should burst forth in terrible menaces against you: and against me his impotency will be manifest, as, spite of his former grandeur, he cannot resist the power I have over him, provided no culpable precipitation on your part interrupt the solemnity of my questions.”

He then opened a door of the closet hitherto concealed from the company, brought a chafing-dish filled with red-hot coals, threw thereon some incense, and walked three times round the altar, pronouncing at each circle a spell. He then drew from its scabbard a sword which hung in his girdle, plunged it in the smoke issuing from the incense, and making frightful

contortions of his face and limbs, pretended to endeavour to cleave the head, which, however, he did not touch. At last he took the head up on the point of his sword, held it up in the air before him, and advanced towards the spectators a little moved.

“Who art thou, miserable dust, that I hold at the point of my sword?” demanded Calzolaro with a confident air and a firm voice. — But scarcely had he uttered this question, when he turned pale; his arm trembled; his knees shook; his haggard eyes, which were fixed on the head, were horror-struck: he had hardly strength sufficient to place the head and the sword on the altar, ere he suddenly fell on the floor with every symptom of extreme terror.

The spectators, frightened out of their wits, looked at the master of the house, who in his turn looked at them. No one seemed to know whether this was to be considered part of the scene, nor whether it was possible to explain it. The curiosity of the audience was raised to its utmost pitch: they waited still a considerable time, but no explanation took place. At length Calzolaro, half-raising himself, asked if his father’s shadow had disappeared.

Stupefaction succeeded astonishment. The colonel was anxious to know whether he was still attempting to impose on the company by a pretended dialogue with the death’s head?

Calzolaro answered that he would do any thing, and that he would willingly submit to any punishment they chose to inflict on him for his frightful crime: but he entreated they would instantly carry back the head to its place of repose.

His countenance had undergone a complete change, and only resumed its wonted appearance on the colonel’s wife acquiescing in his wish: she ordered the head to be instantly conveyed to the church-yard, and to be replaced in the grave.

During this unexpected denouement, every eye was turned on Calzolaro; he, who not long ago was talking with so much emphasis and in such a lofty strain, could now scarcely draw his breath; and from time to time threw supplicating looks on the spectators, as if entreating them to wait patiently till he had recovered strength sufficient to continue his performance.

The colonel informed them in the mean while of the species of jest that he had projected to play on them, and for the failure of which he could not at that moment account. At last Calzolaro, with an abashed air, spoke as follows: —

“The spectacle which I designed to have given, has terminated in a terrible manner for me. But, happily for the honourable company present, I perceive they did not see the frightful apparition which caused me a temporary privation of my reason. Scarcely had I raised the death’s head on the point of my sword, and had begun to address it, than it appeared to me in my father’s features: and whether my ears deceived me or not, I am ignorant; neither do I know how I was restored to my senses; but I heard it say, ‘Tremble, parricide, whom nothing can convert, and who wilt not turn to the path thou hast abandoned!’”

The very recollection produced such horror on Calzolaro's mind as to stop his respiration and prevent his proceeding. The colonel briefly explained to the spectators what appeared to them mysterious in his words, and then said to the penitent juggler:

"Since your imagination has played you so strange a trick, I exhort you in future to avoid all similar accidents, and to accept the arrangement proposed to you by the person whom your father has named as his heir."

"No, monsieur," answered he, "no agreement, no bargain; else I shall only half fulfill my duty. Every thing shall belong to this heiress, and the law-suit shall be abandoned."

He at the same time declared that he was weary of the mode of life he had adopted, and that every wish of his father's should be fulfilled.

The colonel told him that such a resolution compensated for what had failed in the evening's amusement.

The company, however, did not cease making numberless inquiries of Calzolaro, many of which were very ludicrous. They were anxious to know, among other things, whether the head which had appeared to him, resembled that of a corpse or a living being.

"It most probably belongs to a corpse," he replied. "I was so thunderstruck with the horrible effect of it, that I cannot remember minutiae. Imagine an only son, with the point of a sword which he holds in his hand, piercing his father's skull! The bare idea is sufficient to deprive one of one's senses."

"I did not believe," answered the colonel, after having for some time considered Calzolaro, "that the conscience of a man, who like you has rambled the world over, could still be so much overcome by the powers of imagination."

"What! monsieur, do you still doubt the reality of the apparition, though I am ready to attest it by the most sacred oaths?"

"Your assertion contradicts itself. We have also our eyes to see what really exists; and nobody, excepting yourself, saw any other than a simple skull."

"That is what I cannot explain: but this I can add, that I am firmly persuaded, although even now I cannot account for my so thinking, that as sure as I exist, that head is actually and truly the head of my father: I am ready to attest it by my most solemn oath."

"To prevent your perjuring yourself, they shall instantly go to the sexton, and learn the truth."

Saying this, the colonel went out to give the necessary orders. He returned an instant afterwards, saying: —

“Here is another strange phænomenon. The sexton is in this house, but is not able to answer my questions. Anxious to enjoy the spectacle I was giving my friends, he mixed with some of my servants, who, possessing the same degree of curiosity, had softly opened the door through which the chaffing-dish was conveyed. But at the moment of the conjurer falling on the floor, the same insensibility overcame the sexton; who even now has not recovered his reason, although they have used every possible method to restore him.”

One of the party said, that, being subject to fainting himself, he constantly carried about him a liquor, the effect of which was wonderful in such cases, and that he would go and try it now on the sexton. They all followed him: but this did not succeed better than the methods previously resorted to.

“This man must indeed be dead,” said the person who had used the liquor without effect on him.

The clock in the tower had just struck one, and every person thought of retiring; but slight symptoms of returning life being perceptible in the sexton, they still remained.

“God be praised!” exclaimed the sexton awakening; “he is at length restored to rest!”

“Who, old dad?” said the colonel.

“Our late schoolmaster.”

“What then, that head was actually his?”

“Alas! if you will only promise not to be angry with me, I will confess — It was his.”

The colonel then asked him how the idea of disturbing the schoolmaster’s corpse in particular came into his head.

“Owing to a diabolical boldness. It is commonly believed, that when a child speaks to the head of its deceased parent at the midnight hour, the head comes to life again. I was anxious to prove the fact, but shall never recover from its effects: happily, however, the head is actually restored to rest.”

They asked him how he knew it. He answered, that he had seen it all the while he was in a state of lethargy; that as the clock struck one, his wife had finished re-interring the head in its grave. And he described in the most minute manner how she held it.

The curiosity of the company assembled was so much excited by witnessing these inexplicable events, that they awaited the return of the servant whom the colonel had dispatched to the sexton’s wife. Every thing had happened precisely as he described; — the clock struck one at the very moment the head was laid in the grave.

These events had produced to the spectators a night of much greater terrors than the colonel had prepared for them. Nay, even his imagination was raised to such a pitch, that the least breath of wind, or the slightest noise, appeared to him as a forerunner to some disagreeable visitor from the world of spirits.

He was out of his bed at dawn of day, to look out of his window and see the occasion of the noise which at that hour was heard at the inn-door. He saw the rope-dancers seated in the carriage, about to take their departure. Calzolaro was not with them; but presently afterwards came to the side of the vehicle, where he took leave of them: the children seemed to leave him behind with regret.

The carriage drove off; and the colonel made a signal to Calzolaro to come and speak to him.

“I apprehend,” said he to him, when he came in, “that you have taken entire leave of your troop.”

“Well, monsieur, ought I not so to do?”

“It appears to me a procedure in which you have acted with as little reflection as the one which tempted you first to join them. You ought rather to have availed yourself of some favourable occasion for withdrawing the little capital that you have in their funds.”

“Do you then, monsieur colonel, forget what has happened to me; and that I could not have enjoyed another moment of repose in the society of persons who are only externally men? Every time I recall the scene of last night to my recollection, my very blood freezes in my veins. From this moment I must do all in my power to appease my father’s shade, which is now so justly incensed against me. Without much effort I have withdrawn myself from a profession which never had any great charms for me. Reflect only on the misery of being the chief of a troop, who, to earn a scanty morsel of bread, are compelled every moment to risk their lives! — and even this morsel of bread not always attainable. Moreover, I know that the clown belonging to the troop, who is a man devoid of all sentiment, has for a long while aspired to become the chief: and I know that he has for some time been devising various means to remove me from this world; therefore it appears to me that I have not been precipitate in relinquishing my rights to him for a trifling sum of money. I only feel for the poor children; and would willingly have purchased them, to save them from so unhappy a career; but he would not take any price for them. I have only one consolation, which is, the hope that the inhuman treatment they will experience at his hands will induce them to make their escape, and follow a better course of life.”

“And what do you purpose doing yourself?”

“I have told you, that I shall retire to some obscure corner of Germany, and follow the profession to which my father destined me.”

The colonel made him promise to wait a little; and, if possible, he would do something for him.

In the interim, the heiress to his father's property arrived, to have a conference on the subject with him. As soon as he had made known his intention to her, she entreated him no longer to refuse half the inheritance, or at least to receive it as a voluntary gift on her part. The goodness, the sweetness of this young person, (who was pretty also,) so pleased Calzolaro, that a short time afterwards he asked her hand in marriage. She consented to give it to him. And the colonel then exerted himself more readily in behalf of this man, who had already gained his favour. He fulfilled his wishes, by sending him to a little property belonging to his wife, to follow the profession his father had fixed on for him.

Ere he set off, Calzolaro resumed his German name of Schurster. The good pastor, who had so recently felt indignant at his obstinacy, gave the nuptial benediction to the happy couple in presence of the colonel and his family, who on this occasion gave an elegant entertainment at the château.

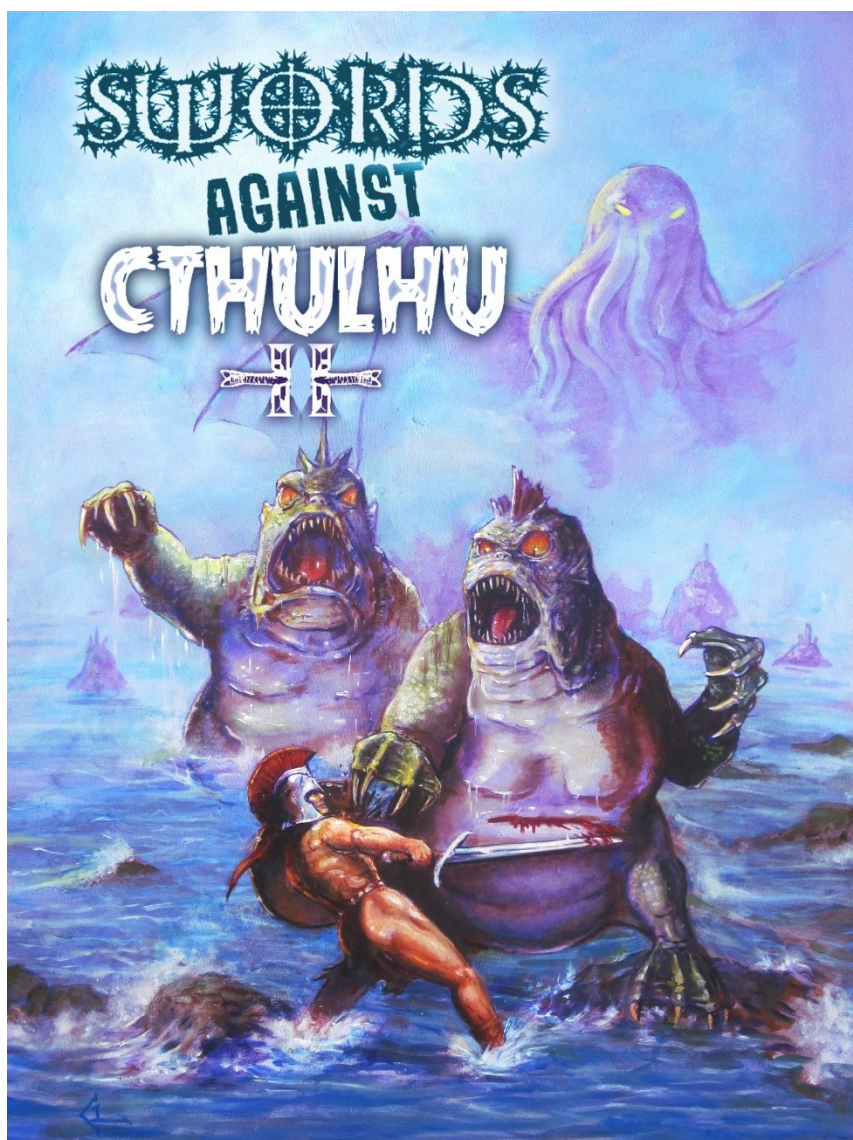
In the evening, a little after sunset, the bride and bridegroom were walking in the garden, at some little distance from the rest of the company, and appeared plunged in a deep reverie. All on a sudden they looked at each other; for it seemed to them, that some one took a hand of each and united them. They declared, at least, that the idea of this action having taken place came to them both so instantaneously and so involuntarily, that they were astonished at it themselves.

An instant afterwards, they distinctly heard these words: —

“May God bless your union!” pronounced by the voice of Calzolaro's father.

The bridegroom told the colonel, some time afterwards, that without these consolatory words, the terrible apparition which he saw on the memorable night, would assuredly have haunted him all his life, and have poisoned his happiest moments.

THE END



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THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND by Jules Verne

Part 3. The Secret of the Island

Chapter 1

It was now two years and a half since the castaways from the balloon had been thrown on Lincoln Island, and during that period there had been no communication between them and their fellow-creatures. Once the reporter had attempted to communicate with the inhabited world by confiding to a bird a letter which contained the secret of their situation, but that was a chance on which it was impossible to reckon seriously. Ayrton, alone, under the circumstances which have been related, had come to join the little colony. Now, suddenly, on this day, the 17th of October, other men had unexpectedly appeared in sight of the island, on that deserted sea!

There could be no doubt about it! A vessel was there! But would she pass on, or would she put into port? In a few hours the colonists would definitely know what to expect.

Cyrus Harding and Herbert having immediately called Gideon Spilett, Pencroft, and Neb into the dining-room of Granite House, told them what had happened. Pencroft, seizing the telescope, rapidly swept the horizon, and stopping on the indicated point, that is to say, on that which had made the almost imperceptible spot on the photographic negative,—

“I’m blessed but it is really a vessel!” he exclaimed, in a voice which did not express any great amount of satisfaction.

“Is she coming here?” asked Gideon Spilett.

“Impossible to say anything yet,” answered Pencroft, “for her rigging alone is above the horizon, and not a bit of her hull can be seen.”

“What is to be done?” asked the lad.

“Wait,” replied Harding.

And for a considerable time the settlers remained silent, given up to all the thoughts, and the emotions, all the fears, all the hopes, which were aroused by this incident—the most important which had occurred since their arrival in Lincoln Island. Certainly, the colonists were not in the situation of castaways abandoned on a sterile islet, constantly contending against a cruel nature for their miserable existence, and incessantly tormented by the longing to return to inhabited countries. Pencroft and Neb, especially, who felt themselves at once so happy and so rich, would not have left their island without regret. They were accustomed, besides, to this new life in the midst of the domain which their intelligence had as it were civilized. But at any rate this ship brought news from the world, perhaps even from their native land. It was bringing fellow-creatures to them, and it may be conceived how deeply their hearts were moved at the sight!

From time to time Pencroft took the glass and rested himself at the window. From thence he very attentively examined the vessel, which was at a distance of twenty miles to the east. The colonists had as yet, therefore, no means of signaling their presence. A flag would not have

been perceived; a gun would not have been heard; a fire would not have been visible. However, it was certain that the island, overtopped by Mount Franklin, could not escape the notice of the vessel's lookout. But why was the ship coming there? Was it simple chance which brought it to that part of the Pacific, where the maps mentioned no land except Tabor Island, which itself was out of the route usually followed by vessels from the Polynesian Archipelagoes, from New Zealand, and from the American coast? To this question, which each one asked himself, a reply was suddenly made by Herbert.

"Can it be the 'Duncan'?" he cried.

The "Duncan," as has been said, was Lord Glenarvan's yacht, which had left Ayrton on the islet, and which was to return there someday to fetch him. Now, the islet was not so far distant from Lincoln Island, but that a vessel, standing for the one, could pass in sight of the other. A hundred and fifty miles only separated them in longitude, and seventy in latitude.

"We must tell Ayrton," said Gideon Spilett, "and send for him immediately. He alone can say if it is the 'Duncan.'"

This was the opinion of all, and the reporter, going to the telegraphic apparatus which placed the corral in communication with Granite House, sent this telegram:—"Come with all possible speed."

In a few minutes the bell sounded.

"I am coming," replied Ayrton.

Then the settlers continued to watch the vessel.

"If it is the 'Duncan,'" said Herbert, "Ayrton will recognize her without difficulty, since he sailed on board her for some time."

"And if he recognizes her," added Pencroft, "it will agitate him exceedingly!"

"Yes," answered Cyrus Harding; "but now Ayrton is worthy to return on board the 'Duncan,' and pray Heaven that it is indeed Lord Glenarvan's yacht, for I should be suspicious of any other vessel. These are ill-famed seas, and I have always feared a visit from Malay pirates to our island."

"We could defend it," cried Herbert.

"No doubt, my boy," answered the engineer smiling, "but it would be better not to have to defend it."

"A useless observation," said Spilett. "Lincoln Island is unknown to navigators, since it is not marked even on the most recent maps. Do you think, Cyrus, that that is a sufficient motive for a ship, finding herself unexpectedly in sight of new land, to try and visit rather than avoid it?"

"Certainly," replied Pencroft.

“I think so too,” added the engineer. “It may even be said that it is the duty of a captain to come and survey any land or island not yet known, and Lincoln Island is in this position.”

“Well,” said Pencroft, “suppose this vessel comes and anchors there a few cables-lengths from our island, what shall we do?”

This sudden question remained at first without any reply. But Cyrus Harding, after some moments’ thought, replied in the calm tone which was usual to him,—

“What we shall do, my friends? What we ought to do is this:—we will communicate with the ship, we will take our passage on board her, and we will leave our island, after having taken possession of it in the name of the United States. Then we will return with any who may wish to follow us to colonize it definitely, and endow the American Republic with a useful station in this part of the Pacific Ocean!”

“Hurrah!” exclaimed Pencroft, “and that will be no small present which we shall make to our country! The colonization is already almost finished; names are given to every part of the island; there is a natural port, fresh water, roads, a telegraph, a dockyard, and manufactories; and there will be nothing to be done but to inscribe Lincoln Island on the maps!”

“But if anyone seizes it in our absence?” observed Gideon Spilett.

“Hang it!” cried the sailor. “I would rather remain all alone to guard it: and trust to Pencroft, they shouldn’t steal it from him, like a watch from the pocket of a swell!”

For an hour it was impossible to say with any certainty whether the vessel was or was not standing towards Lincoln Island. She was nearer, but in what direction was she sailing? This Pencroft could not determine. However, as the wind was blowing from the northeast, in all probability the vessel was sailing on the starboard tack. Besides, the wind was favorable for bringing her towards the island, and, the sea being calm, she would not be afraid to approach although the shallows were not marked on the chart.

Towards four o’clock—an hour after he had been sent for—Ayrton arrived at Granite House. He entered the dining-room saying,—

“At your service, gentlemen.”

Cyrus Harding gave him his hand, as was his custom to do, and, leading him to the window,—

“Ayrton,” said he, “we have begged you to come here for an important reason. A ship is in sight of the island.”

Ayrton at first paled slightly, and for a moment his eyes became dim; then, leaning out the window, he surveyed the horizon, but could see nothing.

“Take this telescope,” said Spilett, “and look carefully, Ayrton, for it is possible that this ship may be the ‘Duncan’ come to these seas for the purpose of taking you home again.”

“The ‘Duncan!’” murmured Ayrton. “Already?” This last word escaped Ayrton’s lips as if involuntarily, and his head drooped upon his hands.

Did not twelve years’ solitude on a desert island appear to him a sufficient expiation? Did not the penitent yet feel himself pardoned, either in his own eyes or in the eyes of others?

“No,” said he, “no! it cannot be the ‘Duncan’!”

“Look, Ayrton,” then said the engineer, “for it is necessary that we should know beforehand what to expect.”

Ayrton took the glass and pointed it in the direction indicated. During some minutes he examined the horizon without moving, without uttering a word. Then,—

“It is indeed a vessel,” said he, “but I do not think she is the ‘Duncan.’”

“Why do you not think so?” asked Gideon Spilett.

“Because the ‘Duncan’ is a steam-yacht, and I cannot perceive any trace of smoke either above or near that vessel.”

“Perhaps she is simply sailing,” observed Pencroft. “The wind is favorable for the direction which she appears to be taking, and she may be anxious to economize her coal, being so far from land.”

“It is possible that you may be right, Mr. Pencroft,” answered Ayrton, “and that the vessel has extinguished her fires. We must wait until she is nearer, and then we shall soon know what to expect.”

So saying, Ayrton sat down in a corner of the room and remained silent. The colonists again discussed the strange ship, but Ayrton took no part in the conversation. All were in such a mood that they found it impossible to continue their work. Gideon Spilett and Pencroft were particularly nervous, going, coming, not able to remain still in one place. Herbert felt more curiosity. Neb alone maintained his usual calm manner. Was not his country that where his master was? As to the engineer, he remained plunged in deep thought, and in his heart feared rather than desired the arrival of the ship. In the meanwhile, the vessel was a little nearer the island. With the aid of the glass, it was ascertained that she was a brig, and not one of those Malay proas, which are generally used by the pirates of the Pacific. It was, therefore, reasonable to believe that the engineer’s apprehensions would not be justified, and that the presence of this vessel in the vicinity of the island was fraught with no danger.

Pencroft, after a minute examination, was able positively to affirm that the vessel was rigged as a brig, and that she was standing obliquely towards the coast, on the starboard tack, under her topsails and top-gallant-sails. This was confirmed by Ayrton. But by continuing in this direction she must soon disappear behind Claw Cape, as the wind was from the southwest, and to watch her it would be then necessary to ascend the height of Washington Bay, near Port Balloon—a provoking circumstance, for it was already five o’clock in the evening, and the twilight would soon make any observation extremely difficult.

“What shall we do when night comes on?” asked Gideon Spilett. “Shall we light a fire, so as to signal our presence on the coast?”

This was a serious question, and yet, although the engineer still retained some of his presentiments, it was answered in the affirmative. During the night the ship might disappear and leave for ever, and, this ship gone, would another ever return to the waters of Lincoln Island? Who could foresee what the future would then have in store for the colonists?

“Yes,” said the reporter, “we ought to make known to that vessel, whoever she may be, that the island is inhabited. To neglect the opportunity which is offered to us might be to create everlasting regrets.”

It was therefore decided that Neb and Pencroft should go to Port Balloon, and that there, at nightfall, they should light an immense fire, the blaze of which would necessarily attract the attention of the brig.

But at the moment when Neb and the sailor were preparing to leave Granite House, the vessel suddenly altered her course, and stood directly for Union Bay. The brig was a good sailer, for she approached rapidly. Neb and Pencroft put off their departure, therefore, and the glass was put into Ayrton’s hands, that he might ascertain for certain whether the ship was or was not the “Duncan.” The Scotch yacht was also rigged as a brig. The question was, whether a chimney could be discerned between the two masts of the vessel, which was now at a distance of only five miles.

The horizon was still very clear. The examination was easy, and Ayrton soon let the glass fall again, saying—

“It is not the ‘Duncan’! It could not be!”

Pencroft again brought the brig within the range of the telescope, and could see that she was of between three and four hundred tons burden, wonderfully narrow, well-masted, admirably built, and must be a very rapid sailer. But to what nation did she belong? That was difficult to say.

“And yet,” added the sailor, “a flag is floating from her peak, but I cannot distinguish the colors of it.”

“In half an hour we shall be certain about that,” answered the reporter. “Besides, it is very evident that the intention of the captain of this ship is to land, and, consequently, if not today, to-morrow at the latest, we shall make his acquaintance.”

“Never mind!” said Pencroft. “It is best to know whom we have to deal with, and I shall not be sorry to recognize that fellow’s colors!”

And, while thus speaking, the sailor never left the glass. The day began to fade, and with the day the breeze fell also. The brig’s ensign hung in folds, and it became more and more difficult to observe it.

“It is not the American flag,” said Pencroft from time to time, “nor the English, the red of which could be easily seen, nor the French or German colors, nor the white flag of Russia,

nor the yellow of Spain. One would say it was all one color. Let's see: in these seas, what do we generally meet with? The Chilean flag?—but that is tri-color. Brazilian?—it is green. Japanese?—it is yellow and black, while this—”

At that moment the breeze blew out the unknown flag. Ayrton seizing the telescope which the sailor had put down, put it to his eye, and in a hoarse voice,—

“The black flag!” he exclaimed.

And indeed the sombre bunting was floating from the mast of the brig, and they had now good reason for considering her to be a suspicious vessel!

Had the engineer, then, been right in his presentiments? Was this a pirate vessel? Did she scour the Pacific, competing with the Malay proas which still infest it? For what had she come to look at the shores of Lincoln Island? Was it to them an unknown island, ready to become a magazine for stolen cargoes? Had she come to find on the coast a sheltered port for the winter months? Was the settlers' honest domain destined to be transformed into an infamous refuge—the headquarters of the piracy of the Pacific?

All these ideas instinctively presented themselves to the colonists' imaginations. There was no doubt, besides, of the signification which must be attached to the color of the hoisted flag. It was that of pirates! It was that which the “Duncan” would have carried, had the convicts succeeded in their criminal design! No time was lost before discussing it.

“My friends,” said Cyrus Harding, “perhaps this vessel only wishes to survey the coast of the island. Perhaps her crew will not land. There is a chance of it. However that may be, we ought to do everything we can to hide our presence here. The windmill on Prospect Heights is too easily seen. Let Ayrton and Neb go and take down the sails. We must also conceal the windows of Granite House with thick branches. All the fires must be extinguished, so that nothing may betray the presence of men on the island.”

“And our vessel?” said Herbert.

“Oh,” answered Pencroft, “she is sheltered in Port Balloon, and I defy any of those rascals there to find her!”

The engineer's orders were immediately executed. Neb and Ayrton ascended the plateau, and took the necessary precautions to conceal any indication of a settlement. While they were thus occupied, their companions went to the border of Jacamar Wood, and brought back a large quantity of branches and creepers, which would at some distance appear as natural foliage, and thus disguise the windows in the granite cliff. At the same time, the ammunition and guns were placed ready so as to be at hand in case of an unexpected attack.

When all these precautions had been taken,—

“My friends,” said Harding, and his voice betrayed some emotion, “if the wretches endeavor to seize Lincoln Island, we shall defend it—shall we not?”

“Yes, Cyrus,” replied the reporter, “and if necessary we will die to defend it!”

The engineer extended his hand to his companions, who pressed it warmly. Ayrton remained in his corner, not joining the colonists. Perhaps he, the former convict, still felt himself unworthy to do so!

Cyrus Harding understood what was passing in Ayrton's mind, and going to him—

“And you, Ayrton,” he asked, “what will you do?”

“My duty,” answered Ayrton.

He then took up his station near the window and gazed through the foliage.

It was now half-past seven. The sun had disappeared twenty minutes ago behind Granite House. Consequently the Eastern horizon was becoming obscured. In the meanwhile the brig continued to advance towards Union Bay. She was now not more than two miles off, and exactly opposite the plateau of Prospect Heights, for after having tacked off Claw Cape, she had drifted towards the north in the current of the rising tide. One might have said that at this distance she had already entered the vast bay, for a straight line drawn from Claw Cape to Cape Mandible would have rested on her starboard quarter.

Was the brig about to penetrate far into the bay? That was the first question. When once in the bay, would she anchor there? That was the second. Would she not content herself with only surveying the coast, and stand out to sea again without landing her crew? They would know this in an hour. The colonists could do nothing but wait.

Cyrus Harding had not seen the suspected vessel hoist the black flag without deep anxiety. Was it not a direct menace against the work which he and his companions had till now conducted so successfully? Had these pirates—for the sailors of the brig could be nothing else—already visited the island, since on approaching it they had hoisted their colors. Had they formerly invaded it, so that certain unaccountable peculiarities might be explained in this way? Did there exist in the as yet unexplored parts some accomplice ready to enter into communication with them?

To all these questions which he mentally asked himself, Harding knew not what to reply; but he felt that the safety of the colony could not but be seriously threatened by the arrival of the brig.

However, he and his companions were determined to fight to the last gasp. It would have been very important to know if the pirates were numerous and better armed than the colonists. But how was this information to be obtained?

Night fell. The new moon had disappeared. Profound darkness enveloped the island and the sea. No light could pierce through the heavy piles of clouds on the horizon. The wind had died away completely with the twilight. Not a leaf rustled on the trees, not a ripple murmured on the shore. Nothing could be seen of the ship, all her lights being extinguished, and if she was still in sight of the island, her whereabouts could not be discovered.

“Well! who knows?” said Pencroft. “Perhaps that cursed craft will stand off during the night, and we shall see nothing of her at daybreak.”

As if in reply to the sailor's observation, a bright light flashed in the darkness, and a cannon-shot was heard.

The vessel was still there and had guns on board.

Six seconds elapsed between the flash and the report.

Therefore the brig was about a mile and a quarter from the coast.

At the same time, the chains were heard rattling through the hawse-holes.

The vessel had just anchored in sight of Granite House!

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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THE WANDERER'S NECKLACE by H Rider Haggard

Book II: Byzantium

Chapter V: Ave Post Secula

It comes back to me that on the following day my successor in the governorship of the jail, who he was I know not now, arrived, and that to him in due form I handed over my offices and duties. Before I did so, however, I made it my care to release Barnabas, I think on the previous evening. In his cell I read the Augusta's warrant to the old bishop.

"How was it obtained, son," he asked, "for, know, that having so many enemies on this small matter of image worship, I expected to die in this place? Now it seems that I am free, and may even return to my charge in Egypt."

"The Empress granted it to me as a favour, Father," I answered. "I told her that you were from the North, like myself."

He studied me with his shrewd blue eyes, and said:

"It seems strange to me that so great and unusual a boon should be granted for such a reason, seeing that better men than I am have suffered banishment and worse woes for less cause than I have given. What did you pay the Empress for this favour, son Olaf?"

"Nothing, Father."

"Is it so? Olaf, a dream has come to me about you, and in that dream I saw you walk through a great fire and emerge unscathed, save for the singeing of your lips and hair."

"Perhaps they were singed, Father. Otherwise, I am unburned, though what will happen to me in the future I do not know, for my dangers seem great."

"In my dream you triumphed over all of them, Olaf, and also met with some reward even in this life, though now I know not what it was. Yes, and triumph you shall, my son in Christ. Fear nothing, even when the storm-clouds sweep about your head and the lightnings blind your eyes. I say, fear nothing, for you have friends whom you cannot see. I ask no more even under the seal of confession, since there are secrets which it is not well to learn. Who knows, I might go mad, or torture might draw from me words I would not speak. Therefore, keep your own counsel, son, and confess to God alone."

"What will you do now, Father?" I asked. "Return to Egypt?"

"Nay, not yet awhile. It comes to me that I must bide here for a space, which under this pardon I have liberty to do, but to what end I cannot say. Later on I shall return, if God so wills. I go to dwell with good folk who are known to me, and from time to time will let you hear where I may be found, if you should need my help or counsel."

Then I led him to the gates, and, having given him a witnessed copy of his warrant of release, bade him farewell for that time, making it known to the guards and certain priests who lingered there that any who molested him must answer for it to the Augusta.

Thus we parted.

Having handed over the keys of the prison, I walked to the palace unattended, being minded to take up my duties there unnoticed. But this was not to be. As I entered the palace gate a sentry called out something, and a messenger, who seemed to be in waiting, departed at full speed. Then the sentry, saluting, told me that his orders were that I must stand awhile, he knew not why. Presently I discovered, for across the square within the gates marched a full general's guard, whereof the officer also saluted, and prayed me to come with him. I went, wondering if I was to be given in charge, and by him, surrounded with this pompous guard, was led to my new quarters, which were more splendid than I could have dreamed. Here the guard left me, and presently other officers appeared, some of them old comrades of my own, asking for orders, of which, of course, I had none to give. Also, within an hour, I was summoned to a council of generals to discuss some matter of a war in which the Empire was engaged. By such means as these it was conveyed to me that I had become a great man, or, at any rate, one in the way of growing great.

That afternoon, when, according to my old custom, I was making my round of the guards, I met the Augusta upon the main terrace, surrounded by a number of ministers and courtiers. I saluted and would have passed on, but she bade one of her eunuchs call me to her. So I came and stood before her.

"We greet you, General Olaf," she said. "Where have you been all this long while? Oh! I remember. At the State prison, as its governor, of which office you are now relieved at your own request. Well, the palace welcomes you again, for when you are here all within know themselves safe."

Thus she spoke, her great eyes searching my face the while, then bowed her head in token of dismissal. I saluted again, and began to step backwards, according to the rule, whereon she motioned to me to stand. Then she began to make a laugh of me to the painted throng about her.

"Say, nobles and ladies," she said, "did any of you ever see such a man? We address him as best we may—and we have reason to believe that he understands our language—yet not one word does he vouchsafe to us in answer. There he stands, like a soldier cut in iron who moves by springs, with never an 'I thank you' or a 'Good day' on his lips. Doubtless he would reprove us all, who, he holds, talk too much, being, as we all have heard, a man of stern morality, who has no tenderness for human foibles. By the way, General Olaf, a rumour has reached us that you have forsaken doubt, and become a Christian. Is this true?"

"It is true, Augusta."

"Then if as a Pagan you were a man of iron, what will you be as a Christian, we wonder? One hard as diamond, no less. Yet we are glad of this tidings, as all good servants of the Church must be, since henceforth our friendship will be closer and we value you. General, you must be received publicly into the bosom of the Faith; it will be an encouragement to others to follow your example. Perhaps, as you have served us so well in many wars and as an officer of our guard, we ourselves will be your god-mother. The matter shall be considered by us. What have you to answer to it?"

“Nothing,” I replied, “save that when the Augusta has considered of the matter, I will consider of my answer.”

At this the courtiers tittered, and, instead of growing angry, as I thought she might, Irene burst out laughing.

“Truly we were wrong,” she said, “to provoke you to open your mouth, General, for when you do so, like that red sword you wear, your tongue is sharp, if somewhat heavy. Tell us, General, are your new quarters to your taste, and before you reply know that we inspected them ourselves, and, having a liking for such tasks, attended to their furnishment. ‘Tis done, you will see, in the Northern style, which we think somewhat cold and heavy—like your sword and tongue.”

“If the Augusta asks me,” I said, “the quarters are too fine for a single soldier. The two rooms where I dwelt before were sufficient.”

“A single soldier! Well, that is a fault which can be remedied. You should marry, General Olaf.”

“When I find any woman who wishes to marry me and whom I wish to marry, I will obey the Augusta’s commands.”

“So be it, General, only remember that first we must approve the lady. Venture not, General, to share those new quarters of yours with any lady whom we do not approve.”

Then, followed by the Court, she turned and walked away, and I went about my business, wondering what was the meaning of all this guarded and half-bitter talk.

The next event that returns to me clearly is that of my public acceptance as a Christian in the great Cathedral of St. Sophia, which must have taken place not very long after this meeting upon the terrace. I know that by every means in my power I had striven, though without avail, to escape this ceremony, pointing out that I could be publicly received into the body of the Church at any chapel where there was a priest and a congregation of a dozen humble folk. But this the Empress would not allow. The reason she gave was her desire that my conversion should be proclaimed throughout the city, that other Pagans, of whom there were thousands, might follow my example. Yet I think she had another which she did not avow. It was that I might be made known in public as a man of importance whom it pleased her to honour.

On the morning of this rite, Martina came to acquaint me with its details, and told me that the Empress would be present at the cathedral in state, making her progress thither in her golden chariot, drawn by the famed milk-white steeds. I, it seemed, was to ride after the chariot in my general’s uniform, which was splendid enough, followed by a company of guards, and surrounded by chanting priests. The Patriarch himself, no less a person, was to receive me and some other converts, and the cathedral would be filled with all the great ones of Constantinople.

I asked whether Irene intended to be my god-mother, as she had threatened.

“Not so,” replied Martina. “On that point she has changed her mind.”

“So much the better,” I said. “But why?”

“There is a canon of the Church, Olaf, which forbids intermarriage between a god-parent and his or her god-child,” she replied dryly. “Whether this canon has come to the Augusta’s memory or not, I cannot say. It may be so.”

“Who, then, is to be my god-mother?” I asked hurriedly, leaving the problem of Irene’s motives undiscussed.

“I am, by the written Imperial decree delivered to me not an hour ago.”

“You, Martina, you who are younger than myself by many years?”

“Yes, I. The Augusta has just explained to me that as we seem to be such very good friends, and to talk together so much alone, doubtless, she supposed, upon matters of religion, there could be no person more suitable than such a good Christian as myself to fill that holy office.”

“What do you mean, Martina?” I asked bluntly.

“I mean, Olaf,” she replied, turning away her head, and speaking in a strained voice, “that, where you are concerned, the Augusta of late has done me the honour to be somewhat jealous of me. Well, of a god-mother no one need be jealous. The Augusta is a clever woman, Olaf.”

“I do not quite understand,” I said. “Why should the Augusta be jealous of you?”

“There is no reason at all, Olaf, except that, as it happens, she is jealous of every woman who comes near to you, and she knows that we are intimate and that you trust me—well, more, perhaps, than you trust her. Oh! I assure you that of late you have not spoken to any woman under fifty unnoted and unreported. Many eyes watch you, Olaf.”

“Then they might find better employment. But tell me outright, Martina, what is the meaning of all this?”

“Surely even a wooden-headed Northman can guess, Olaf?”

She glanced round her to make sure that we were alone in the great apartment of my quarters and that the doors were shut, then went on, almost in a whisper, “My mistress is wondering whether or no she will marry again, and, if so, whether she will choose a certain somewhat over-virtuous Christian soldier as a second husband. As yet she has not made up her mind. Moreover, even if she had, nothing could be done at present or until the question of the struggle between her and her son for power is settled in this way or in that. Therefore, at worst, or at best, that soldier has yet a while of single life left to him, say a month or two.”

“Then during that month or two perhaps he would be wise to travel,” I suggested.

“Perhaps, if he were a fool who would run away from fortune, and if he could get leave of absence, which in his case is impossible; to attempt such a journey without it would mean his death. No, if he is wise, that soldier will bide where he is and await events, possessing his soul in patience, as a good Christian should do. Now, as your god-mother, I must instruct you

in this service. Look not so troubled; it is really most simple. You know Stauracius, the eunuch, is to be your god-father, which is very fortunate for you, since, although he looks on you with doubt and jealousy, to blind or murder his own god-son would cause too much scandal even in Constantinople. As a special mark of grace, also, the Bishop Barnabas, of Egypt, will be allowed to assist in the ceremony, because it was he who snatched your soul from the burning. Moreover, since the Sacrament is to be administered afterwards, he has been commanded to attend here to receive your confession in the chapel of the palace, and within an hour. You know that this day being the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels, you will be received in the name of Michael, a high one well fitted to a warlike saint, though I think that I shall still call you Olaf. So farewell, my god-son to be, until we meet at the cathedral, where I shall shine in the reflected light of all your virtues.”

Then she sighed, laughed a little, and glided away.

In due course a priest of the chapel came to summon me there, saying that the Bishop Barnabas awaited me. I went and made my confession, though in truth I had little to tell him that he did not already know. Afterwards the good old man, who by now was quite recovered from his hurts and imprisonment, accompanied me to my quarters, where we ate together. He told me that before he attended in the chapel he had been received by the Empress, who had spoken to him very kindly, making light of their difference of opinion as to images and with her own mouth confirmed him in his bishopric, even hinting at his possible promotion.

“This, my son,” he added, “I am well aware I owe to your good offices.”

I asked him if he would return at once to Upper Egypt, where he had his bishopric.

“No, my son,” he answered, “not yet awhile. The truth is that there have arrived here the chief man in my diocese, and his daughter. He is a descendant of the old Pharaohs of the Egyptians who lives near the second cataract of the Nile, almost on the borders of Ethiopia, whither the accursed children of Mahomet have not yet forced their way. He is still a great man among the Egyptians, who look upon him as their lawful prince. His mission here is to try to plan a new war upon the followers of the Prophet, who, he holds, might be assailed by the Empire at the mouths of the Nile, while he attacked them with his Egyptians from the south.”

Now I grew interested, who had always grieved over the loss of Egypt to the Empire, and asked what was this prince’s name.

“Magas, my son, and his daughter is named Heliodore. Ah! she is such a woman as I would see you wed, beautiful indeed, and good and true as she is beautiful, with a high spirit also, such as befits her ancient blood. Mayhap you will note her in the cathedral. Nay, I forgot, not there, but afterwards in this palace, since it is the command of the Empress, to whom I have been speaking of their matters, that these two should come to dwell here for a while. After that I hope we shall all return to Egypt together, though Magas, being on a secret mission, does not travel under his own name, but as a merchant.”

Suddenly he paused, and began to stare at my throat.

“Is aught wrong with my armour, Father?” I asked.

“No, son. I was looking at that trinket which you wear. Of course I have noted it before, but never closely. It is strange, very strange!”

“What is strange, Father?”

“Only that I have seen another like it.”

“I dare say you have,” I answered, laughing, “for when I would not give this to the Augusta, it pleased her to have it copied.”

“No, no; I mean in Egypt, and, what is more, a story hung to the jewel.”

“On whom? Where? What story?” I asked eagerly.

“Oh! I cannot stay to tell you now. Moreover, your mind should be fixed upon immortal crowns, and not on earthly necklaces. I must be gone; nay, stay me not, I am already late. Do you get you to your knees and pray till your god-parents come to fetch you.”

Then, in spite of all I could do to keep him, he went, muttering: “Strange! Exceeding strange!” and leaving me quite unfit for prayer.

An hour later I was riding through the streets of the mighty city, clad in shining armour. As the season was that of October, in which the Feast of St. Michael falls, we wore cloaks, although, the day being warm, they were little needed. Mine was of some fine white stuff, with a red cross broided on the right shoulder. Stauracius, the eunuch and great minister, who had been ordered to act as my god-father, rode alongside of me on a mule, because he dared not mount a horse, sweating beneath his thick robe of office, and, as I heard from time to time, cursing me, his god-son, and all this ceremony beneath his breath. On my other hand was my god-mother, Martina, riding an Arab mare, which she did well enough, having been brought up to horsemanship on the plains of Greece. Her mood was varied, for now she laughed at the humour of the scene, and now she was sad almost to tears.

The streets were lined with thousands of the pleasure-loving people of the city, who had come out to see the show of the Empress going in state to the cathedral. They were gathered even on the flat house-tops and in the entrances to the public buildings and open places. But the glory of the sight was centred, not about me, with my escort of guards and chanting priests, but in Irene’s self. Preceded and followed by glittering regiments of soldiers, she drove in her famous golden chariot, drawn by eight milk-white steeds, each of which was led by a bejewelled noble. Her dress was splendid and covered with sparkling gems, and on her yellow hair she wore a crown. As she went the multitudes shouted their welcome, and she bowed to right and left in answer to the shouts. Now and again, however, bands of armed men, clad in a dress of a peculiar colour, emerged from side streets and hooted, crying:

“Where is the Augustus? Give us the Augustus. We will not be ruled by a woman and her eunuchs!”

These men were of the party of Constantine, and set on by him. Once, indeed, there was a tumult, for some of them tried to bar the road, till they were driven away, leaving a few dead or wounded behind them. But still the crowds shouted and the Empress bowed as though nothing had happened, and thus by a somewhat winding route, we came to St. Sophia.

The Augusta entered, and presently I and those with me followed her into the wonderful cathedral. I see it now, not in particular, but as a whole, with its endless columns, its aisles and apses, and its glittering mosaics shining through the holy gloom, across which shot bars of light from the high window-places. All the great place was full of the noblest in the city, rank upon rank of them, come thither to see the Empress in her glory at the great Feast of St. Michael, which year by year she attended thus.

At the altar waited the Patriarch in his splendid robes, attended by many bishops and priests, among them Barnabas of Egypt. The service began, I and some other converts standing together near to the altar rail. The details of it do not return to me. Sweet voices sang, censers gave forth their incense, banners waved, and images of the saints, standing everywhere, smiled upon us fixedly. Some of us were baptised, and some who had already been baptised were received publicly into the fellowship of the Church, I among them. My god-father, Stauracius, a deacon prompting him, and my god-mother, Martina, spoke certain words on my behalf, and I also spoke certain words which I had learned.

The splendid Patriarch, a sour-faced man with a slight squint, gave me his especial blessing. The Bishop Barnabas, upon whom, as I noted, the Patriarch was always careful to turn his back, offered up a prayer. My god-father and god-mother embraced me, Stauracius smacking the air at a distance, for which I was grateful, and Martina touching me gently with her lips upon the brow. The Empress smiled upon me and, as I passed her, patted me on the shoulder. Then the Sacrament was celebrated, whereof the Empress partook first; next we converts, with our god-parents, and afterwards a number of the congregation.

It was over at last. The Augusta and her attendants marched down the cathedral towards the great western doors, priests followed, and, among them, we converts, whom the people applauded openly.

Looking to right and left of me, for I was weary of keeping my gaze fixed upon the floor, presently I caught sight of a face whilst as yet it was far away. It seemed to draw me, I knew not why. The face was that of a woman. She stood by an old and stately-looking man with a white beard, the last of a line of worshippers next to the aisle along which the procession passed, and I saw that she was young and fair.

Down the long, resounding aisle the procession marched slowly. Now I was nearer to the face, and perceived that it was lovely as some rich-hued flower. The large eyes were dark and soft as a deer's. The complexion, too, was somewhat dark, as though the sun had kissed it. The lips were red and curving, and about them played a little smile that was full of mystery as the eyes were full of thought and tenderness. The figure was delicate and rounded, but not so very tall. All these things and others I noted, yet it was not by them that I was drawn and held, but rather because I knew this lady.

She was the woman of whom, years ago, I had dreamed on the night on which I broke into the Wanderer's tomb at Aar!

Never for one moment did I doubt me of this truth. I was sure. I was sure. It did not even need, while she turned to whisper something to her companion, that the cloak she wore should open a little, revealing on her breast a necklace of emerald beetles separated by inlaid shells of pale and ancient gold.

She was watching the procession with interest, yet somewhat idly, when she caught sight of me, whom, from where she stood, she could scarcely have seen before. Of a sudden her face grew doubtful and troubled, like to that of one who has just received some hurt. She saw the ornament about my neck. She turned pale and had she not gripped the arm of the man beside her, would, I think, have fallen. Then her eyes caught mine, and Fate had us in its net.

She leaned forward, gazing, gazing, all her soul in those dark eyes, and I, too, gazed and gazed. The great cathedral vanished with its glittering crowds, the sound of chanting and of feet that marched died from my ears. In place of these I saw a mighty columned temple and two stone figures, taller than pines, seated on a plain, and through the moonlit silence heard a sweet voice murmuring:

“Farewell. For this life, farewell!”

Now we were near to each other, now I was passing her, I who might not stay. My hand brushed hers, and oh! it was as though I had drunk a cup of wine. A spirit entered into me and, bending, I whispered in her ear, speaking in the Latin tongue, since Greek, which all knew, I did not dare to use, “Ave post secula!” Greeting after the ages!

I saw her bosom heave; yes, and heard her whisper back:

“Ave!”

So she knew me also.

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