

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 13, ISSUE 30
25TH NOVEMBER 2018

THE STRANGE END OF THE COWARD EARLESS CLINT

BY GREGORY
OWEN
*I DON'T SHOOT
MEN IN THE
BACK...*

TEST

BY RICK
MCQUISTON
*EASY
PREY...*

OZ BY ROB BLISS

THE STRAW MAN COMETH CONCLUDES...

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Merritt*

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

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This week's cover illustration is Concept-art done for Sintel, 3rd open-movie of the Blender Foundation by [David Revoy / Blender Foundation](#). Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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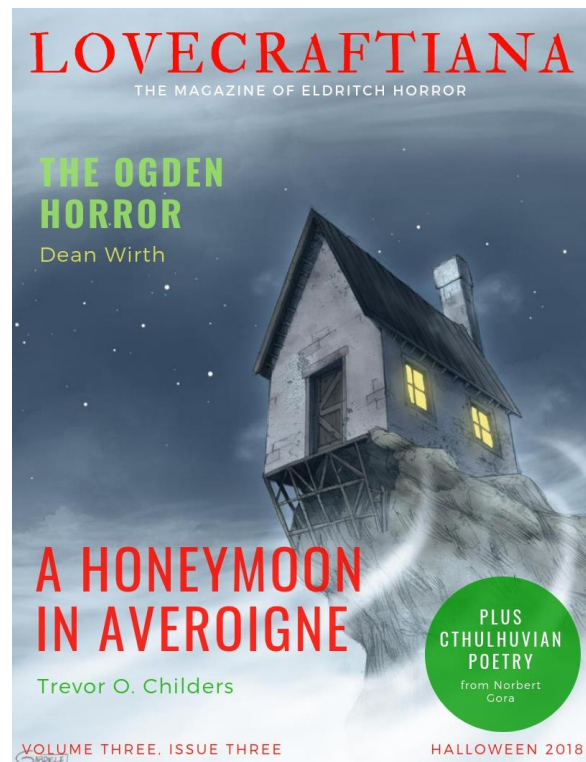
EDITORIAL

This week, a serial killer sails to Oz, a gunslinger meets a dead man, a man glimpses a creature, Flora, Fauna and the Challenger fight the Straw Man, and Kursaal faces the judgement of his elders.

Mud finds himself looking down the barrel of Rat's quantum pistol. Professor Challenger goes to war with the ape-men. And the shining one dances.

—Gavin Chappell

Now out from Rogue Planet Press: [*Lovecraftiana: Halloween Eve 2018*](#).

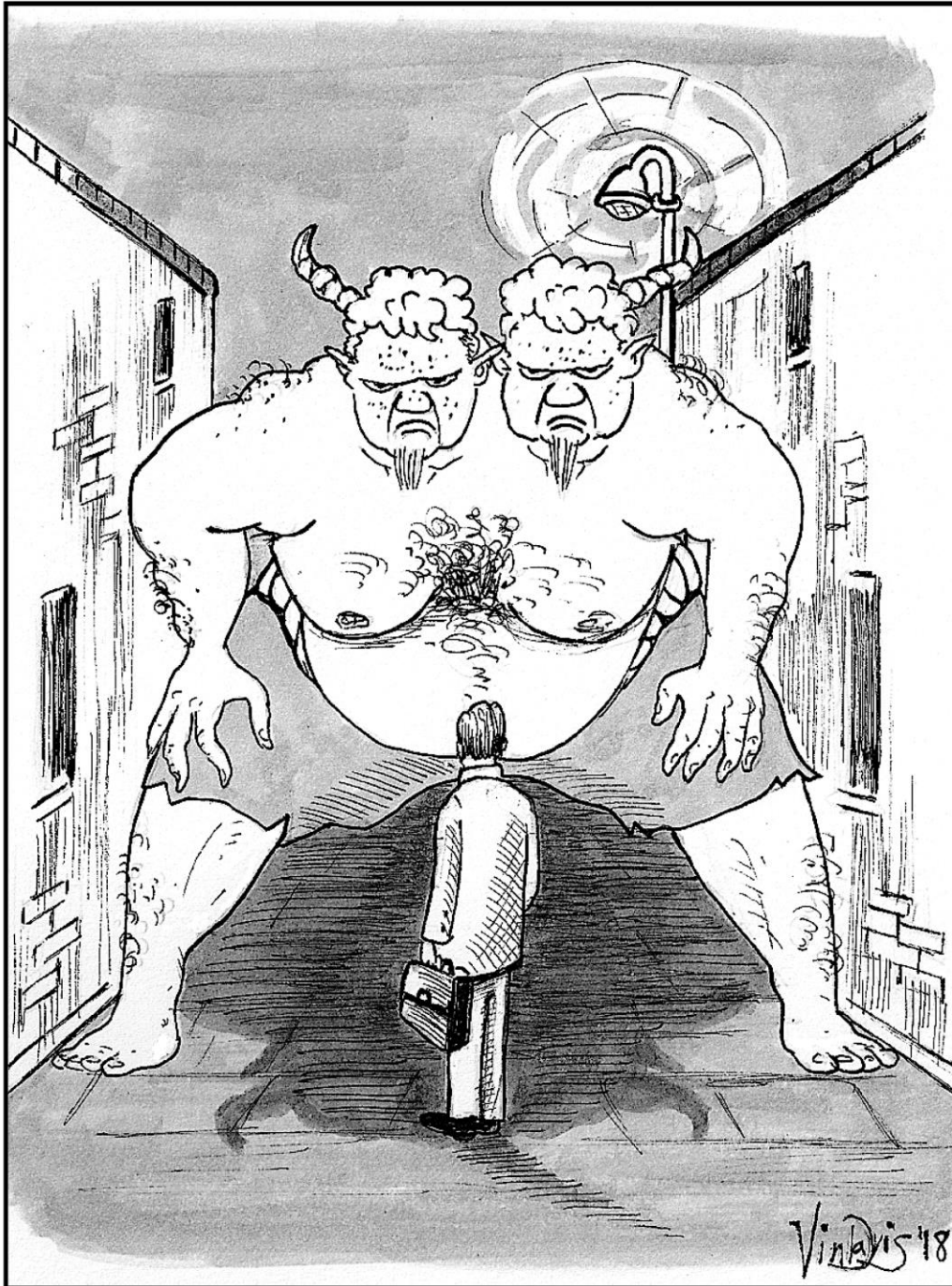


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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"JUST CURIOUS...WHEN YOU BLOKES GO TO A SHOW DO YOU
BUY ONE OR TWO TICKETS?"

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

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

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

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

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

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OZ by Rob Bliss

Oh, to live during the days of a World War. The Second seemed more fun than the First, but I'd take either one of them. When half the globe gathered to exorcise all of their fears, to give vent to every real and delusional paranoia, and to declare as many brand of enemies as the language could name. Now, however, our vocabulary has broadened. Technology writes dictionaries. Every foe has a legion of names, and no one is ever guilty of merely a single crime.

Whether a military man parachuting from a flak-clogged sky as his buzzing, screaming airplane streaks a comet descent, or an underground resistor, plainclothes, forged papers in his pocket, currency sewn into the lining of his heavy farmer's coat, whispering passwords through cellar windows as dark windmills turn under storm clouds.

Such a time—such lives to live—every manifestation of a human being still called a hero on some shore. The drafted school teacher slipping up behind an exhausted sentry, cradling his rifle like a teddy bear, his chair tipped back to lean against a Roman-era stone wall (why all sentries must be forced to pace, yet why the pacing leads to greater exhaustion)—and the teacher in foreign uniform with a few words learned reading Nineteenth Century authors cracks pebbles under his rubber heel before sliding a bayonet across the sleeper's windpipe.

He does no murder... if he makes it to benevolent shores.

But the map will get him there. And the contacts he is supposed to meet, the false names but accurately spoken, codes given to put him on a motorcycle, bury him under the straw of a farmer's wagon, slip him into the cargo holds of fishing boats, edging him out of enemy territory and over the invisible demarcation of a field, a hedge, a forest of non-partisan trees, a sylvan brook into neutral territory.

From there he travels visible and talkative, knowing a smattering of a few languages, interpreting every fifth word in an abandoned section of newspaper a week old, to discover how the world has been turning since he had last been in it and of it. Months have passed for him in darkness and silence, holding his breath in attics, nose close to farm animal shit, not sure what was worse—the growl of hunger or the groan of a stomach renewing its function due to a wedge of stale bread.

How many had he killed by bullet and grenade, how many bellies pierced, throats slit—a curious soldier shuffling too close to a copse of trees—a shot fired wide but the thunder of the gun echoing—the poor foreign boy attentively growing his first blonde moustache—head smashed in by a stone held like an unthrown baseball—the blood washing into his blue eyes, forehead skin split and an arrowhead of bone jutting out, pushed by the pressure of grey matter.

How many guilty and innocent killed, abducted, raped—sometimes the enemy, sometimes an ally, the lonely widow, the hungry orphan, the blind warrior reaching for the tumbled cigarette pack and the creased photo of his pretty wife far away ... all became guilty, therefore crime became life. Survival was more important than the war and its many triumphs and hydra-headed meanings.

Even the guilty who lost the war bought, sold, and slaughtered their way out of the devastated war zone. Dressed as woman, as nuns, gold fillings paying ferrymen, stepping silently out of one line into another, speaking the enemy's tongue, using the passwords of pop culture, smiling, praising the friendship of the formerly hated, vowing to wave a new flag so long as they could step aboard the steamship departing for a new continent.

There are always new continents on a single globe, ones that will not sully their hands—soaked in the blood of neighbours—who also will not sully their hands—in the wars of ancient continents.

There is always an escape for the hated. The killer hides in the hold beneath luggage and coiled rope, deafened by the drone of diesel engines and hypnotized by the wash of some sea against the echoing steel hull. Asleep or awake, his mind is essentially preoccupied with only two thoughts: where he has come from and where he is going to.

He is travelling and turning a page in his life. A new name is chosen from amongst many, a new biography developed as the ship sails on.

The pariah writes a new chapter and is free.

I am a serial killer, still uncaught. Young, old, male, female, black, white—I kill all. They are meat sheathed in skin, and I am a butcher, freeing souls—composting the human back into the soil—Earth has more value than its species. You figure me out, I can't. I don't have to. I live by only my rules—why is that wrong—all nations do it—I am a nation. I am at war and, thus, have every right to kill the enemy ... like my fathers and grandfathers before me. Call me World War Three.

I have taken weapons of opportunity—a chair, a shard of broken glass, a pen, a ceramic sculpture—but prefer my calling card: the straight razor. Small to hide, easy to open, a tight grip and a single lethal edge allows me to open a jugular like peeling an apple skin. The left hand grips their hair at the back of the head—the skullcap—their neck instantly stiffening at the feel of a foreign grip. Our animal ancestors never fully developed a suitable defence when, or if, they were ever attacked from the back. So, today, we panic and become wood as adrenaline surges through our bloated veins, and it takes a few seconds for our thoughts to collect and find a strategy to defend against the killer behind us.

In less than a few seconds, of course, my blade has bled you, and the shock sinks you to the floor. I merely step a pace or two away and watch. Once I see the life draining from your eyes, I straddle you, knees pinning your biceps, and I set to carving.

Open shirt, hairy or shaven, tits or pectorals, a blank canvas on which I trace my images and lexicon. A jagged blade draws crude stick figures of conquistadores coming ashore, or buccaneers pillaging a town. "Tortuga", "Madagascar", "The Mosquito Coast", I have been

known to scratch into loose skin and tight muscle, assuredly much to the confusion of investigators. Twelve kills to date, but a baker's dozen tempts.

They think I'm a foreigner since it's so easy to pin an aberration on an alien. But I'm one of them—suit and tie, winning smile, intoxicating cologne, arm candy, stock portfolio and real estate holdings. They—rightly—look for a pirate, but in these modern times, piracy occurs most often on dry land.

No, what they fail to understand is not my urge to kill but to escape. I know I'm wrong, I'm a bad boy, a hell awaits, I know I should stop. And I plan to. But where can I go? The warrior and the pirate—the villain and the priest—they were all allowed to leave. Once, in ancient times (were the Romans more civilized than us? Is progress one small step forward, two leaps backwards?), there was an option given by every court: punishment if you must stay, or if you're willing to leave it all, carrying your life's remnants on your back, then it was exile. Go, and don't ever come back.

Ah, Australia! (But now a first world democracy which insists on punishing its bad boys; there is no more option; I cannot become a new Gallipoli.) If only there were still an Oz where I could be sent—to survive or die, all crimes forgiven—but don't come back. Pitcairn Island, St. Helena, Brazil, Argentina. (Do Nazis still exist, processing cocaine in Amazonian jungles, riding horses with gauchos, vanishing amongst stone age tribes who still cut their cheeks in honour of animal gods?) Of course, they all still exist, but this is the age of the electronic eye, the retina scan, facial-recognition software—the passport linked to international policing agencies, which are linked to national and local swine, so that wherever you go, that's where you are. And where you may forever stay.

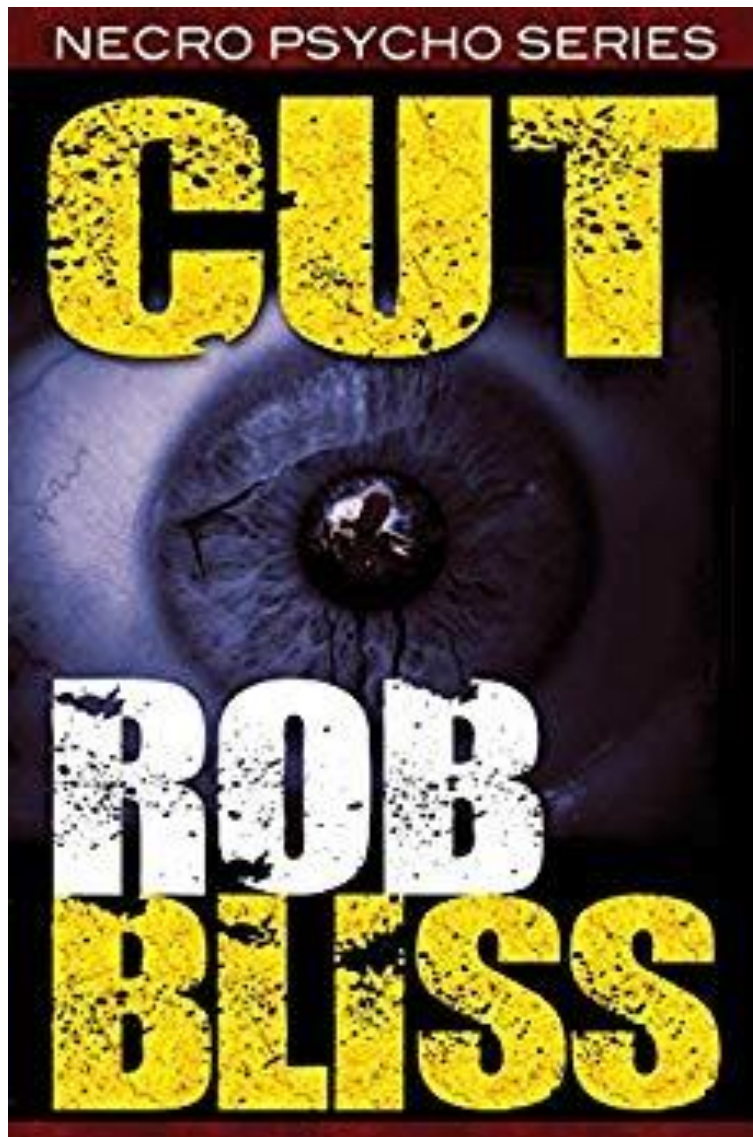
Everyone knows they're being watched, and yet somehow they are still able to live long lives.

And the hunters help hunters help hounds to chase the fox, which can no longer be a gentlemen foe. The chase is rigged when a drone flies over and GPS tracks and the fox has an implant under the loose skin at the back of the neck. And if they fail, the extradition treaty attacks. An 'ex' tradition—history and its fair play is made extinct.

There are no more pirates. Holograms make forgery difficult if not impossible. But ships still smuggle, and white slavery is a booming business, even in the cyber age. I'll make it. By hook or by crook.

If there is no Oz, then we, the pariahs of the shrinking world, must make our own. One more kill and I set sail. Bon voyage to the fox on the ship, laughing at the baying of impotent hounds on modern shores.

THE END



Available from [Amazon](#).

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THE STRANGE END OF THE COWARD EARLESS CLINT by Gregory Owen

Part One

The aged whiskey burned his throat, sending liquid heat down into his stomach that spread to every portion of his body. He slammed the glass down with a clink. Keeping his gaze low, he slapped his grimy hand on the bar to get the bartender's attention.

"Gimme 'nother."

The gentleman behind the bar, an older fellow with a thick moustache and a gruff expression, eyed the younger man sitting on the stool as he turned his focus away from the other drinking customers a few seats down. Making his way toward the far end closest to the door, he reached under the bar for the open whiskey bottle and poured another shot into the glass.

"There ya go, sir," he said coolly.

The young man didn't respond for a moment, looking at the glass intently.

The bartender cleared his throat. "Anything else, sir?"

Taking the glass and holding it to his lips, the customer replied in a huff. "Gimme a minute." He tipped his head back and gulped hard, beckoning the bartender again with another slap.

"Another?"

He nodded, and the bartender tipped the whiskey bottle into the glass. As he did so, though, he couldn't help but stare at the man. He leaned forward to try and get a better look at his face.

Thin and wiry, his skin was concealed by a layer of sun and dirt that also coated his unwashed clothing. His scarred complexion, hidden beneath a rough beard and a mop of curly brown hair, could not mask his beady eyes. They were triangular slits the colour of coal that kept looking to the floor uncomfortably. Perhaps his greatest identifying feature, however, was the absence of his left ear, and in its place a lumpy, mangled growth of skin barely covered by the scraggly fur on his head. That particular portion of his appearance was being observed with increasing scrutiny by the burly man three stools down.

As soon as the bartender finished his pour, the man was already swallowing it down and demanding another.

"Mighty thirsty, aren't we sir?"

He mustered a wet belch and cleared his throat, wiping his arm across his mouth. "Yup."

But the bartender, his curiosity slowly piquing, merely placed the whiskey back on the bar, neglecting to pour anymore. The bottle, brand new only an hour ago, was already half empty, the

young customer having ingested most of its contents. "Mind if I ask your name, sir?"

"I do mind," he answered quickly. "Pour me another."

"I think his name is Clint Musgrave."

Both the bartender and the man looked toward the end of the bar at the larger gentleman who had been staring at this stranger to the town for a good five minutes, and his fat, sweaty face showed a crooked yellow smile of recognition. The bartender narrowed his eyes as he tried to process the name, his moustached mouth curling in thought, and he stepped back without even realizing it.

"Uh...you know this guy, Johnny?" Johnny Wells was a lifelong resident of Arizona, coming to Tombstone the year it was established in an attempt to make money as so many others had done, and eleven months later, he owned a small farm outside of town, making a living as a rancher, trading cattle and other supplies alongside his son. He had spent a number of afternoons and nights in the saloons and gambling houses that were slowly appearing in the area, as evidenced by his portly, gluttonous visage. As such, Johnny knew many of the locals...and even some of the unfamiliar faces who passed through. He also knew of their reputations.

"A'yuh, I know 'im, Eustace," Johnny stated, turning his eyes back to the rugged patron, leaning closer. "I know you."

Clint kept his eyes to the bar, trying fruitlessly to keep his face partially concealed. He clutched the glass tightly. "No, don't think you do, friend."

"No, I believe I do...I can tell by that...uh, scar." He gestured toward Clint's lack of a left ear. "I hear there's a good story behind that 'un...and it ain't 'cause you cut yerself shavin'."

"You hear a lotta things," Clint said.

"I reckon I hear a lot more than you do!" Johnny bellowed with laughter, his rotund gut heaving with each gasp as he slapped the back of the patron next to him and pointed at the wound on the side of Clint's head. He grinned widely with pride at his self-admitted clever witticism and pushed himself up from his seat.

"They call ya 'Earless' Clint, don't they?" He stepped around behind the outlaw, his boots dragging across the smooth floor in scuffs. "Wouldn't it make more sense to call ya 'One-Ear?' Heh." Johnny poked Clint on the shoulder, but he didn't react. "You kill'd a lotta people...so I hear," he said in a mocking tone.

But Clint didn't acknowledge the remark, holding his seething tongue. He could feel his face flushing with anger and alcohol.

"Ya heard of 'im, ain't ya, Eustace? Ya heard a' ol' 'Earless' Clint Musgrave? He's quite the dangerous little outlaw..."

The bartender couldn't stop staring at Clint, nodding his head. He knew him all right- he'd heard his name spoken many times...knew of things he had done. Eustace started moving toward the sawed-off shotgun he kept under the bar directly in front of him. He was unable to shake the rising feeling that he was going to need it, seeing as Johnny didn't know when to stop and had a habit of going much too far.

"How 'bout you?" Johnny posed to the men that he'd been sitting next to moments ago, each of whom nodded slightly, trying to keep out of the conversation. "See? They know ya."

"I don't know them...don't know you. Don't want to."

"Reputation carries a lotta weight 'round Tombstone. Ya...hear...things, heh." Johnny sneered as he leaned his head in close, circling around behind the smaller man like a cougar stalking a fallen deer. "Know what else I hear?"

Clint clenched his teeth. "What?"

"I also hear yer somethin' of a...cowardly... type," Johnny goaded.

"I ain't no coward," Clint muttered softly. "Not a goddamn coward at all..."

"Sure you are...you ain't no better than that pisser Jack McCall...ya know, the one that shot 'Wild Bill' in Deadwood?"

Clint instinctively reached for the six-shooter in his holster with a calm hand, caressing the hammer with his calloused thumb. "Listen, friend...I ain't ever shot no man from behind...I don't shoot men in the back."

"Only in the front, and when they ain't holdin', right?" Johnny snickered, looking around the saloon to his audience. "An unarmed man is always worth shootin' fer someone like you. An' I ain't your goddamn friend..."

"Good, we share that sentiment," he said. "You...uh, Eustace," he pointed at the bartender, "Another drink?"

Eustace still kept his nervous focus on the shotgun.

"Tell me...tell ev'ryone how...how many people have you kill'd in the past two years? What? Twelve? Thirteen?"

Unknown to his heckler, a thin smile crept onto Musgrave's lips. Pride was one of his greatest sins, and he wasn't lacking in it when it came to his deeds. It always took precedence even when restraint was needed, and now, he didn't feel the need to try and conceal his identity- in fact, he thought he would flaunt it. "Sixteen."

"Oh...I mus' apologize...my mistake. Sixteen men you've kill'd. You must be proud. Wait...they

was men, wasn't they? Or do you kill women an' children too?"

Trying again to ignore the larger man chuckling and sending droplets of spit onto the back of his neck, Clint looked at Eustace directly, realizing with finality that his whiskey well had run dry- he could also sense that the timid bartender was plotting something of his own. Slowly, he moved his left hand to his waist, searching for something hidden from view.

"Why doncha tell errybody 'bout the big kill you made...tell 'em 'bout that marshal you shot in the face...what was his name?" Johnny paused, his words riddled with sarcasm. "Oh, right...Tennenbaum. U.S. Marshal. One of the most tenacious lawmen in the entire Southwest...and you kill'd 'im when he was unarmed..."

"You wasn't there..." Clint said, his grip on his gun becoming tighter.

"I met 'im once...stern fella, but seemed fair. He got a small posse together to go after you...chased you through the Choctaw Nation after you went an' robbed a stagecoach outside of Dodge City...chased you for days...an' you kill'd 'em all."

"That true?" asked one of the other patrons in the saloon.

"Yup," Johnny replied. "All true. But that ain't the kicker of the story...ya see, this little yella belly had 'em dead to rights, but didn't let 'em fight back...nah, a real man would'a let 'em go or at least let 'em duke it out like men...but ol' "Earless" shot 'em dead..."

Clint sighed, his hands still at his waist. "Ya know...Johnny, ain't it?...ya seem awfully saddened by the loss of that lawdog...seem so interested in bringin' it up...what's it to you, anyway? The way you're goin' on, you'd think I made love to yer sister..." He turned to look at Johnny, eyeing him from his head to his boots. "But, of course, I ain't much for humpin' farm animals..."

But Johnny ignored the insult, seeing that the outlaw's conceit was growing. The fat rancher sat on the stool next to Clint, placing one greasy palm on his shoulder and the other on the bar. "He was a good man...ev'ryone you kill'd were good men. But that ain't my problem. I jus' don't like goddamn cowards in my town," he hissed.

There was a powerful sense of dread permeating the saloon, the air stale with the smell of beer and smoke, and everyone inside was deathly silent. Clint had found what he was hunting for on his person during the tales of his exploits, gripping it in his left hand while still keeping his right at his holster. He finally turned to face Johnny, whose badgering grin had changed to a grimace of total disdain.

"I ain't got no gun, Musgrave...wanna put a bullet in me?"

That did it.

"Nah," Clint said softly. "Got somethin' else for you-"

There was a swift motion. Johnny Wells yelped as he felt the blade of Clint's skinning knife pass through his hand, pinning him to the top of the bar, and a stream of blood sprayed upward like a small geyser. He fell on his knees, knocking the stool down, and he could feel the knife tearing through the tendons as his bulbous body pulled him to the floor.

Clint, on the other hand, jumped up from his seat and drew his pistol, aiming at the other men, many of whom held their open palms upward in surrender while he kept his eyes on the blubbing rancher. "How d'ya like that, ya fat piece a' horse shit?!" Tears streamed down Johnny's face as he begged for the torment to stop, and his attacker obliged. The outlaw plucked the knife from Johnny's round hand, sending him collapsing in a wheezing heap.

"I didn't want this!" he shouted in a rising pitch, wiping the blood from the blade onto his pant leg and sliding it back into his belt. "I swear to God, I didn't! But you sons-a-bitches wouldn't let it go, would ya?! I don't mind the killin'...hell, it's fun!" He smiled a rodent's smile, his display of possible regret swept away by his overwhelming arrogance. "I had other things I wanted to do today, of course...but I don't ever mind puttin' a knife into a pig! Yeah, I'm "Earless" Clint Musgrave, the meanest bastard in the territory...remember that name, ya ugly wretches! I'll carve it into yer bellies if any of ya cross me again!"

As he concluded his declaration, he looked to the bar and realized that there was nothing there but the customary glasses and bottles. No bartender in sight.

"Eustace, come on out now," Clint said cautiously.

Unknown to the others who were preoccupied when Musgrave stabbed Wells in the hand, Eustace dove to the floor and climbed under the bar, grabbing the sawed-off shotgun he had coveted for the better part of the last ten minutes. But he quickly found that while he was spry enough to do so unnoticed, he was unable to attain the nerve to show himself.

"I know you're under there...might as well come on out!"

The bartender, however, proved unwilling, so Clint decided to provide his own incentive. Taking aim at the half-empty bottle of whiskey on the bar, he clicked the hammer and fired, all of the patrons jumping at the sound, and sent shards of glass and droplets of liquor all over the bar and on top of Eustace.

"Now, goddamn you!"

The old bartender stood quickly, training his shotgun on the small outlaw. Clint returned the courtesy by aiming his gun directly at his face. Eustace was trembling a bit, his forehead spotted with beads of sweat, and he looked down to Johnny, who still lay on the floor clutching his hand, whimpering.

"Are...you o-okay, Johnny?"

The weakened rancher tried to look at Eustace to nod, to give some form of confirmation that he

was still conscious, but he yelped when he felt the back of Clint's free hand slapping him across the cheek. He slumped back down to the wooden floor.

"Ol' Johnny's fine there, Eustace...an' you will be, too...I'm just gonna walk out the front door and be gone," Clint negotiated.

"I'm s-sorry, s-sir...but I'm afraid...I'm afraid I can't let ya walk outta here!"

"You're still callin' me 'sir'? I can't believe it!" He stepped forward, placing his boot on top of Johnny's good hand and looking down at him. "Cause a ruckus, aim a gun at him...and he still calls me 'sir.' I swear, he's a damn nice fella, ain't he?" He became serious again in moments. "I'll say this one more time, and only once more."

Eustace kept his shaking arms as rigid as he could manage despite the fact that the shotgun felt as though it weighed one hundred pounds.

"You," the outlaw growled, cocking the hammer back on his pistol, "you put that damned shotgun back under the bar...take your dirty hands offa it...or I swear, I'll make a canoe outta your head!"

The threat echoed in the saloon, and Eustace faltered for a moment as he started to lower the gun. He looked around the room and saw all of the customers staring, their eyes full of disapproval and loathing because of his cowardice and willingness to give in to a criminal's demands so easily. He knew they thought he was yellow, especially because he was about to surrender to a man like "Earless" Clint. He couldn't stomach it. No, not this time. Within a second, Eustace processed his next actions, and he raised his gun.

Seeing the quick movement, Clint made good on his verbal promise to the bartender and pulled the trigger. The bullet tore through Eustace's forehead and sent pieces of skull and brain tissue splattering onto the wall behind him that resembled freshly ground strawberries. The bartender's muscles jerked, causing him to fire the shotgun wildly toward the ceiling, and he crashed backward against the shelves, smashing bottles and drinking glasses under his newly dead weight. His body came to rest in enough liquor to keep him preserved for a few days, at least, a thought that made Clint laugh under his breath, but he was soon back to business.

"Y'all lemme go, and that'll be the end of it...let it go...Eustace didn't, and y'all saw what happened. Just lemme go."

Johnny sputtered, licking the blood from his lips as he tried to sit up. "You won't...walk away from...this, ya snake..."

"I think I might," Clint replied, slowly stepping backward toward the door. "Ya don't wanna die, don't follow...don't give me no more trouble, and no more trouble'll come to ya, simple as that." He holstered his firearm, turned around, and pushed through the creaking doors.

"We...ain't...done," the rancher whispered as he pushed himself up from the floor. "Not by

a...mile.”

Clint charged away from the saloon and walked briskly to get to his speckled Appaloosa tied out front, but before he could untie him and ride away, he noticed something at the end of the street under the shade of the General Store in the afternoon sun. Holding his hand over his eyes to block the sunlight, he made out the shape of a man in a long, dark brown duster and a flat-brimmed hat. He recognized the figure even if he didn't know his identity.

It was the same man that had been following him for the last three days. The same man he was sure that he saw as he entered Tombstone earlier that day and attempted to avoid by slipping into Eustace's saloon in the first place. And now, that same man was standing there, watching, just as he always seemed to do. He looked to be of average height and build, but his face was concealed by the shadows. Originally, Clint had believed the man to be a mirage or some kind of trick of the light the first time he saw him in the Mexican territories, but he continued to show himself with increasing frequency. It was no coincidence that he was here.

But while the man seemed threatening, he had made no effort to attack or disarm Clint, a fact that was all the more befuddling. Why pursue Clint if he didn't plan to kill him or arrest him? Maybe he was waiting for an opportunity, but there had surely been a few already. He simply stood and stared, and while Clint really needed to leave the town before things became even more problematic than they already were, he ignored his better judgment, choosing instead to step across the street to try to identify his unknown follower. He was fairly certain that, as had become customary, he would not succeed.

Every time Clint had tried to get close to the man during his recent journey, he would duck into an alley or step into the nearby wilderness and seemingly vanish out of sight like a nightmare at daybreak. He was never on a horse- just there, a fact that kept standing out to the young Musgrave, and he wondered how he was being pursued by a man with no means of transportation aside from his own legs. Yet this time seemed to be much different, for as the outlaw, instinctively keeping his hand close to his holster, made his way toward the elusive stranger, the stranger, in turn, started walking forward to face him. He was no longer attempting to pull a disappearing act.

“You been followin' me, ain't ya?”

As the man stepped into the light, Clint quickly came to the dire realization of just who he was, and a chill washed over him and seeped into his spine. The hairs on the nape of his neck stood on end.

United States Marshal Tennenbaum.

It ain't possible, Clint thought. It can't be!

It was Tennenbaum, surely, but his features were different. He was greyer, sullied, and his gaunt

form had a sickly pallor. But Clint noticed something far more disturbing as the marshal approached- his mouth was deformed and gnarled, a number of his teeth missing and his shredded lips forming a devilish sneer. He remembered how the lawman had earned that mouth, but it couldn't be true...it made no sense.

Despite these monstrous changes, it was him. Clint could see that same cold, calculating look in the enforcer's eyes. To further drive the point home, Clint was able to make out a badge on his coat, a round silver emblem featuring a five-pronged star reading "U.S. Marshal." There was no doubt anymore, though the implications were still ridiculous in his mind.

"I know you..." Clint began.

The man moved with a shambling limp, his right leg dragging slightly across the dirt. The spurs on his boots were ornate silver stars polished to perfection, and they made metallic jingles with each step he took. The sound reminded Clint of the first and only time the two of them had met face to face.

"...You're dead!"

"Hello, Clinton," Tennenbaum said.

The voice was familiar to him, and yet it didn't seem to belong to the marshal. Not from what Clint remembered. Tennenbaum's voice was one of a man who grew up in Texas, the deeply Southern and masculine drawl of a man who spent many adolescent years herding cattle and thought too highly of himself, but the words spoken now were guttural, more sinister in nature, and there was a diabolical tone embedded in each inflection. It was a voice he had heard only once before, much like the marshal's, but it didn't quite register in his mind at that moment. He was too focused on other things- primarily the issue of the man standing before him living and breathing.

"You took my ear, you sonuvabitch...and I killed you! You're dead!"

"Yes," the marshal uttered. "Dead."

"I watched you bleed out like a stuck pig," Clint continued, proudly smiling. "Heh, I killed ya, ya shittin' law dog..."

Tennenbaum was unfazed, cocking his head to the side as he observed the grinning criminal, the expression of the enforcer akin to the look of a confused hawk. He watched Clint's shaky hand hover around his holster, and sent him an admonishing look- not to deter him, but to express that it wouldn't do any good to shoot him.

"Clinton," he said again.

Hearing his name with such venom, reality quickly returned to Clint. He finally ascertained that the voice he heard did not belong to the marshal he had met two years prior.

“You ain’t the marshal,” he whispered. “No, he is dead...you look like ‘im, but you don’t sound like ‘im...”

The crooked corner of Tennenbaum’s mouth began to rise, as though pleased with the accusation. “Yes.”

“Wait...” Memories began to flood the mind of the young Musgrave, and he could finally recall the source of that voice. This being was not Tennenbaum...it was something else entirely, something wearing his face. “Wait, I do know you...that voice...you ain’t the marshal...but I remember hearing you speak...”

“You owe me a debt,” the thing said, fluid curdling in its words.

With that sentence, Clint recalled the event that Johnny Wells alluded to in the saloon...the truth of which only Clint himself knew.

In the spring of 1878, Clint had passed through Kansas on a crusade of gambling, women, and alcohol in a drunken stupor. Desperate after spending all of his money and sobering up, he murdered two men driving a stagecoach carrying supplies outside of Dodge City and made off with nearly four hundred dollars, heading into the Choctaw nation to evade capture when news of his crime had spread. Upon hearing of the outlaw’s actions, U.S. Marshal John Tennenbaum, a righteous and well-respected enforcer who had captured or killed over twenty lawbreakers during his tenure, led a posse consisting of himself and three others- Marcus Everett, Leland Whitehead, and Ike Parsons- into the territory after Musgrave, determined to bring him in, dead or alive.

After tracking the young criminal for a day and a half, the group finally cornered him in a small valley at high noon. Clint fired the first shot upon seeing the men, and they returned fire, mortally wounding his old white horse and forcing him to take cover behind a cluster of large boulders. Tennenbaum ordered a cease-fire to his men while Clint remained hidden and reloaded his pistol.

“Nowhere left to run, Clint!” The men in his posse looked at the marshal, dumbfounded. They were prepared to kill this lowlife, and couldn’t understand their superior’s desire to end things as peacefully as possible. But Tennenbaum carried a hint of civility despite the world he lived in and the profession he chose to do. He believed in providing one chance at redemption, but the others didn’t feel the same way.

“Throw down your gun and surrender, or you will be fired upon...We will kill you, no doubt about it!”

Clint was quick with his reply. “You can go to Hell, Marshal! I ain’t backin’ down from no man!” He pushed the last bullet into the revolving chamber, spinning and clicking it closed. He was definitely not a brave man, and his gun gave him the only courage he could ever hope to

have.

“Suit yourself, Musgrave! Makes no difference to me. If’n I have to kill you, it’ll just mean the trip back to Dodge will be a bit quieter! Can’t beg for forgiveness and mercy when you’re dead!”

“Marshal, we should just end ‘im,” Whitehead stated.

“Yeah, why should we dictate terms with a rat?” Everett asked, showing agreement with his friend. “He kill’d two men...likely others before them. Should just shoot ‘im here and now.”

Tennenbaum held his ground. “I’m the one in charge here, in case it’s been forgotten. I’m givin’ him one last chance, fellas, and that’s it. He takes it, grand...he doesn’t, he dies. Can’t get any clearer than that.”

The men deliberated and Musgrave went unnoticed, peeking around his cover. There was a metallic glint from his pistol that caught Tennenbaum’s attention, but he was too late to react. Clint fired and Leland Whitehead’s heart was struck by the bullet, killing him within seconds. He went limp and fell from his saddle, rolling over face down. His horse neighed in fright, rearing up and trotting away from the others as Tennenbaum and the rest of his posse sat in silent shock.

“Goddamnit!” Parsons shouted, cocking his rifle in haste. “He got Leland!”

Clint concealed himself behind the boulder again for a moment to catch his breath, and he returned to his previous position to take aim.

Tennenbaum’s eyes narrowed and his lips pursed with hatred, the air seething from his throat. “Awright...let’s shoot this piece of shit,” he ordered.

The men readied their weapons, and the marshal could see his target barely peeking over the rock, preparing to take another shot at him and the remainder of his group. Tennenbaum prepared his Colt Single Action Army, holding it with a hint of leisure as he had done many times before. He was definitely finished with negotiation, and he relished what was coming, finally seeing his opportunity as Clint Musgrave showed just the right amount of his head.

A gunshot roared across the valley, and Clint felt a sudden sting followed by a rush of growing warmth that trickled onto his shoulder. Almost in a trance, he dropped his gun and reached up with quivering fingers. He felt that something was missing. Pulling his hand away, he saw the sunlight reflecting off of the blood that coated his palm and dropped to his knees.

“Huh?” he muttered in shock.

On the ground were chunks of flesh, speckled red. The marshal’s bullet had taken much of Clint’s left ear clean off, blasting it apart. He picked up a large hunk of meat and stared, mortified that he had been deformed by a lawman.

“No...God, no...my ear...”

Tennenbaum, Everett, and Parsons climbed off of their steeds and made their way toward Clint's hiding place, prepared to finish the wounded Musgrave once and for all.

"Winged 'im," Everett said with a huff.

"Time to finish it," the marshal responded grimly. "Nobody shoots 'til I do."

The trio moved slowly, their guns drawn and ready to fire, and Clint heard them coming. He could hear the clinking spurs of Tennenbaum's boots, the sound like seconds of a grand clock ticking down until his impending demise. As they drew closer and closer, Clint looked for his gun in the dirt, still in shock from blood loss and a growing fear of dying, and in his frantic searching, he began talking to himself.

"Please...please, don't lemme die like this...not here...not today. Not by these bastards...I gotta have better than this...I can't be gunned down like a dog."

Clint quickly gave up on his pointless search for his pistol and closed his eyes- maybe a prayer would help. God forgave everyone for all of their misdeeds according to what he'd been told about the good book. He wasn't sure he believed in anything...honestly, he didn't really care what God or anyone else thought of him. Despite the fact that the acts he had committed in his life were frowned upon, he enjoyed what he did and how he lived, and really didn't want it to end so soon. Certainly not at the hands of a U.S. Marshal. But he figured that saying a little prayer would bring him comfort at the very least, if nothing else. It couldn't hurt.

"God...please don't let these men kill me...I can't die now...please help me...I'm...sorry," he said softly, his last words lacking any form of truth. The spurs were louder, and the men were almost upon him. "Please...God, help me..."

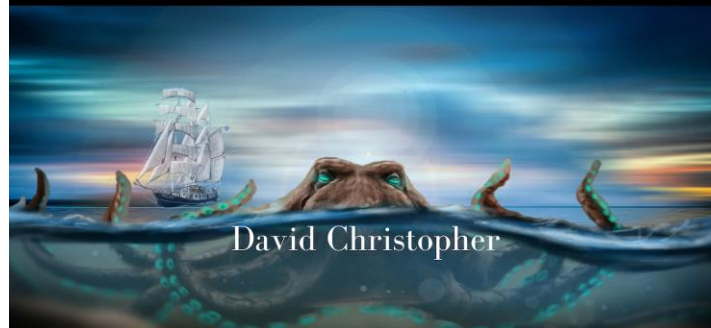
Suddenly, a gentle breeze flowed through the stagnant air, combing Clint's face and filling his nose with the fragrance of burning cinders. He opened his eyes, looking around for the origin of the odour, but there was nothing. Above Tennenbaum's spurs, he heard a low whisper and could barely make out a noise resembling words.

"You plead to your 'God,' Clinton...but only I will answer..."

CONCLUDES NEXT WEEK

GONZO PULP PUBLICATIONS
PRESENT

Long John Silver and the Squid-God of Lemuria



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TEST by Rick McQuiston

Rick ignored the disorientation he felt and pulled down the stepladder from its perch on the garage wall. The flimsy aluminium clanked as it hit the floor.

He hated cleaning out the gutters, but it was something that had to be done. If he ignored them it could lead to bigger problems when Old Man Winter came knocking.

“All right, let’s get this over with.”

Rick awoke flat on his back. The stepladder was across his chest, its cold metal chilling the exposed flesh of his neck, and the broom he was planning on using in the yard was next to his head.

“What the...”

The words slipped from his slack mouth. They held little if any conviction, being diluted by the lethargy that coursed through his prone body.

Rick used what little strength he still had to push the ladder off and forced himself to sit up. His head spun around the garage, adding to his disorientation, but he managed to stay calm. The inevitable confusion about what happened wormed its way into his mind then, eventually taking over all other thoughts and demanding to be addressed, due to its relevance if nothing else.

He stood up and brushed himself off.

“All right, Rick, you have to get a hold of yourself. You just had an accident, that’s all. It could happen to anybody.”

But his feeble attempt at reassurance was hollow and he knew it.

Rick turned and rushed into the house, knocking over boxes and a small table in the process. He needed a drink of water to clear his head. Time had become a stranger, an alien thing that didn’t apply to him anymore and only added to his confusion.

A surge of defiance ruffled through Rick as he fumbled to fill a glass with water. He had no intention of ending his days while trying to clean up his backyard, and he vowed to get to the bottom of why he passed out.

A tiny beetle scuttled across the floor, disappearing beneath the refrigerator.

Rick felt as if he were being watched and he tried to shake off the feeling but couldn’t. It was definite, concrete, a fact. He tossed the glass of water into the sink, not caring about the mess, and turned to face the door leading to the yard. It stood before him like a pathway to a new

dimension, a realm of unknown dangers and impossible realities.

Rick, did you finish cleaning the gutters and leave the ladder in the yard or did you put it back in the garage, where you blacked out?

The question swirled in his head like leaves in a storm. He had no answer for it though, and that made it even more difficult to understand.

He stepped toward the door, determined to get to the bottom of the mystery. The possibility that he had simply passed out from dehydration, or allergies, or any number of other plausible explanations occurred to him but he refused to believe them.

There has to be something more to it.

The doorknob felt soft in his hand, like a damp sponge, and Rick wanted to recoil from it but didn't. Instead, he abruptly twisted it, and the door swung open to reveal his back patio butting up to the house on one side and giving way to his lawn on the other.

Behind him something scampered across the floor.

Rick turned but saw nothing.

He spun back around and faced his yard. The feeling that he was being watched was stronger than before, so much so that he couldn't ignore it. It ruled his actions, compelling him to proceed with caution. He decided however to simply step onto the patio in one quick move. If he delayed any longer he might lose his nerve, and living with uncertainty was not an option for him.

A strong breeze wafted into Rick's face, bringing with it a cool, refreshing vigour. With renewed energy he looked at his yard, noting that some items were not where he had left them.

Or thought he had left them.

He noticed something dart across the rear perimeter of the yard and disappear behind the shed.

Did you finish cleaning the gutters?

He turned and saw the ladder, the same one that was lying on top of him in the garage, standing at attention in front of the gutters.

Or did you put it back in the garage?

There was more movement in the yard. Something small, no bigger than a golf ball, crawled through the grass only a few feet in front of him. He trained his eyes on it but couldn't see what it was.

You're being watched.

A beetle shot across the patio. It was pale red, almost pink, and sported a pair of antennae long enough to be tentacles. They cut through the air with the ease of an experienced acrobat on a high wire.

Rick only caught a glimpse of the creature but it was enough. It was more than enough. It was more than would last him ten lifetimes.

Get back to the house!

Rick made a beeline for the door, but stopped in his tracks when he reached the threshold.

The kitchen floor swarmed with bugs. Literally thousands crawled over the tiles, and one another, in a mindless dance of unnerving movement similar to maggots on a fresh carcass.

Rick stumbled backward until he fell. He landed with a painful thud on the patio but never took his eyes off what was in the house. It took his breath away just trying to wrap his head around it.

And then the inevitable happened. As Rick lay sprawled out, the bugs began to crawl out of the house. They moved in a uniform manner, inching their way along as if they were a single entity. They marched past the threshold in perfect synchronization, like a miniature, well-trained army.

Rick could only stare as the bugs came closer to where he was. He tried to cry out but could only utter gibberish; his tongue felt like a lead pipe; the inside of his mouth like sandpaper.

The bugs crawled forward on a multitude of legs. Their beady eyes were trained on the human, studying him with cold indifference. Their subject was before them, and the results of their test were impressive to say the least. The specimen had failed to grasp the reality alterations, falsely concluding that it was his imagination, a perfect result to all their hard work and calculations.

The creatures swarmed with excited anticipation as they crept closer to Rick. Their test had proved to be a success. They were confident now that they would have little if any difficulty subjugating the remainder of the population.

Humans were such easy prey.

The bugs, realizing in the collective consciousness that they had no further need for Rick, swarmed over him, indulging in their first meal in weeks.

THE END

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THE STRAW MAN COMETH by Jesse Zimmerman

Part Three: The Straw Man Concludeth

The knowledge in my mind is so strong. I imagine everything, the city of Northsphere waiting to be destroyed, the Challenger's past, this great library behind us in this old campus, the fields of Killer Grass to the southeast, the green mountains that we had trekked over to get here.

I reach as the hum of the great cannon overwhelms my hearing. The library's shadow leans into a darkening twilight. The sun sets to the left of us, casting long shadows.

The cannon's turret faces northward to its target, the city of Northsphere. The machinery inside is on full display, the creator of the dreadful weapon clearly having no conception of walls. I see gears, cogs, grinding metal chains, and conveyers. Beyond all the clunking bits and bars there is a bright light. This is the ammunition. I know this from the slug critter that Straw Man has placed in my brain. I remember everything I ever learned thanks to that, and each memory I want to revisit, but this is not the time!

The Straw Man looks as if he is about to turn to me. I pretend to gaze off into nothing, letting my vision blur until I see three Straw Men, and I bop my head a bit to look disoriented, which is easy since I pretty much am. Having memories rush back to you at once will do that. He doesn't turn though, just keeps laughing, slapping the ground and sending bits of grass, pebble, and earth about at each smack. Overhead I expect the turret to shoot any second!

As the noises grow louder, I look back at my sister and the Challenger trapped in their cages. Both are just starrng forward, and I imagine they're dreading what's about to happen.

I reach.

My hand goes into my tunic from the front, my arm touching my neck as I retrieved the horseshoe-looking item, the Mighty Magnet. I still have it and remember everything about it. I read about it once in Mother's library.

I clasp the curve of it, the cold metal, pointing the two fat, flat ends of it at the cannon and I shout: "Lirot Nnyrk!"

Although I cannot hear over the cannon's charging, I feel the thing power-up in my hand. It vibrates, pulsates, and I turn it slightly to the right, right at the Atto standing in front of the cannon's mid-section, the very nexus where the biggest gears grind against each other.

"Push!" I say.

The Atto flails its short limbs. It's moving and I yell: "Push!" and it flies into the open wall of the cannon into the churning machinery!

Straw Man continues to laugh, seemingly not noticing.

The Atto gets grounded fast, crunched into a starfish-like shape for a split moment before vanishing into the inner cogs. I swerve rightward, taking three long steps, keeping the twin points of my new weapon pointed north. There are three Attos now.

The cannon shakes, sparks emit from within, and the charging turns into a coarse, explosive, churning sound!

It's now when the Straw Man brings his immense arms to his sides. He's noticed something's wrong. I have it, the next Atto. There is one next to it too.

"Push!" and both fly at once into the grinds, sparks and metallic bits flying everywhere while the cannon begins to quake like a seaside village.

Straw Man charges forward in the confusion. The last Atto jumps about while the big brute bounds towards the machine! The turret of the cannon is jolted, nuts and bolts flying apart at the place where it joins the rest of the cannon, and it falls, crashing to the grass. As Straw Man turns his massive upper body about, I turn my magnet to the Atto at his side.

"Grab!" I yell and the Atto stops jumping. I have it!

I heave the mighty magnet upward and to the right, causing the metal critter to fly up and slam into the side of Straw Man's head.

He falls over.

I spin around to see the Challenger and Fauna cheering, waving their hands over their heads in the cages.

"Grab doors! Both at once and pull!" I command the magnet.

It happens. The cages fly open, the locks bursting apart by the force of the magnet. Fauna jumps out, the front door just the right size, while the ranger flings his legs through first.

The Straw Man is beginning to stand. The cannon sputters in place behind him, gears flying from its middle, the bright light, the ammunition, still pulsing. I retrieve Fauna's sword, the Challenger dashing forward for his own. There is no time for the bows and arrows but I manage to bring my dagger with the magnet. Once sis takes her blade we run.

That machine, that weapon; it doesn't take a well-read person with a brain slug inside her head to realize that it'll blow up! And as I run I remember, the fires of this cannon spread faster than any fire known.

"Where are we running?" Fauna calls ahead to the Challenger who has bounded ahead of us.

“Up!” I cry, pointing to the library. We are turning around the big tower now, back to the front entrance, for I also know that this fire travels slower vertically.

We all charge fully around the tower, stampeding towards the doorway. Once we pass under the arch and into the great front chamber we hear the explosion. Every floor shakes. There is the sound of glass bursting on every level. Colourful fire appears on the far wall. We pass swiftly to the winding stairs. The Challenger surges upwards first and Fauna hits my side with her free hand, insisting I go as she takes one last look at the doorway.

The Challenger’s feet thump at every step. If we suddenly stopped his heels would fly into my forehead. If I stopped I’d get hit by my sister’s sword. As we ascend I get a glance over the open space where fires have overtaken more than half of the room, streaking through carpeting and devouring bookshelves. I hold the rail to my side, but it becomes hot! The fire is growing upward beneath us!

My mind races with my feet. I can’t believe that not long ago I was going through this library in a state of euphoria. It was here where I got this magnet and saw the Killer Grass, that same Killer Grass that grows on the lands south and east of here! I wish things were different, that I could stay here, that we hadn’t ran into this monstrous man.

It’s floor seven when flames are at Fauna’s back, and she begins to cry out. I can’t stop! Must move! The Challenger reaches the next floor and dashes onto level eight. I follow him, as does Fauna, who somersaults onto the carpet right as the fires reach our floor.

“I knew we wouldn’t make it!” grumbles the ranger, pointing up to the ninth floor. “If only we can find a way up there! We can fly out on the flying ships on the roof! It’s our only chance!”

The fires are spreading fast, the flames flickering with a medley of colours, taking over the carpeting before us, and I see the fires rising up the stairs, beginning to feast on the floor of the ninth level and that big stone-wood door that leads to the roof.

“Run!” Fauna cries, smacking my shoulder. There is now a wall of fire between us and the stairs. The only way we can go is through the big archway, the one that has inscriptions above that read: Delipha’s Artefacts.

“Delipha, goddess of the sea!” I exclaim as our trio runs into another large chamber, this one painted dark blue, and I see tanks—aquariums full of water filled with the bones of fish; no custodians, I guess. We spot a little ways in many rows of tables and desks. I see a short column beyond them, its top a square platform. I run ahead of the others. There I see an item placed on the hard surface, a rod. I know what this is. It is near the size of my little dagger, the handle made of smooth pearl, made to fit in one’s palm, while the very end of it contains a round blue-green stone. It’s Delipha’s Rod.

I take the rod before me and call for Delipha, bidding my two companions to part as I aim the rod with the green-blue stone at the huge flames. An enormous stream of water jets forth from

the stone, getting larger as it travels through the space. My sister and the Challenger jump to the sides as the fires fall before them.

I feel immense joy. “Thank you Sea Goddess!”

The entire eighth floor balcony area is no longer on fire, the carpet soggy and black. The ninth floor still burns and, as we run up to the stairs, we see that the big door has burned down. Twilight beams in from the doorway. There is fire between us and there.

I call to Delipha once more and point my newfound item, shooting water upward, dissipating the fires. A fish flops out from the stream of water, bouncing along the floor. I lower the rod and the water stops. Fauna runs first. I go after her, feeling the heat through my shoes, the fires still rising and growing. Soon the eighth floor will be alight once more. We two sisters reach the ninth floor.

Beyond the doorway is an open space, the roof, which makes up most of the ninth floor. There are, on a flat stone surface, two ships made of wood, each with a single mast and man-sized triangular sail.

“Hey Challenger!” Fauna shouts. “You were right! We’re out of here!”

“Come back, Jim-Jim!” the horrible voice of the Straw-Man rises up from the base of the library.

I turn about and see that the Challenger is not with us. He leans over the rail on the eighth floor. Fires light up around him and the wall of multi-coloured flames re-emerges between us and him.

With his immense strength and dexterity the Straw Man manages to jump straight up to the eighth floor, his huge body emerging from the flames. Dozens of little fires dance upon his body and clothing, yet he seems unhurt. The Challenger backs into the chamber of Delipha, his sword raised.

“Straw-Boy!” Fauna yells and he turns about to reveal his face is covered in grotesque burns.

I am angry, want him gone. I raise Delipha’s rod and shoot.

It shoots through flame and hits him in the eyes. I keep the stream on his face, going downward into his gaping maw next, causing the big man to gurgle uncontrollably.

“Challenger!” I call to the ranger and raise the mighty magnet in my other hand. “Hold onto your sword!” As planned the magnet pulls the end of his blade, and the Challenger hangs onto it like a kid grabbing a balloon, his legs dangling as he floats past the temporarily blinded Straw-Man and through the fire-wall and onto the ninth floor. I shoot more water at the Straw Man’s face and then we run, hearing the Straw Man scream behind us. As all three of us charge outside, I glance and see a little crab is pinching the Straw Man’s nose in its claw while he reaches to grab it.

On the roof we are hit with evening breeze. We pile onto the closer of the two ships. The ship is similar to the size of the last flying ship we saw, able to fit four or five people, about the size of a large wagon. In moments we are hovering above the tower. Fauna has taken the ship's driving mechanisms, two levers at the front; one for going up and down, the other for backwards and forwards. I look over the side with the Challenger at the burning building below. We rise higher and I notice there are three cannonballs on the deck of the other ship down there.

I see the Straw Man charge out the door and onto the roof, remembering that he told me he could leap to huge heights. With the whole tower now on fire, thick smoke streaming out all the windows beneath, the Straw Man steps onto the other flying ship, his huge body taking up most of the deck, and with an enraged face he pursues us!

I hear my sister curse. The ranger instructs her to go as high and fast as she can. "Hold on to something!" he yells, grabbing the side of the deck's wall. I place Delipha's rod in my belt beside my dagger, keeping the big magnet in my right hand while my left grabs the mast in the deck's middle.

"You'll pay! All of you!" roars the Straw Man. With one hand on one of the levers, he raises his ship, still a fair distance from us, but close enough where I can see the spittle when he shouts. One of his meaty hands encircles a cannon ball and with one move he chucks it at us.

I yell at my sister to swerve, which she does, taking the ship leftward, tilting slightly. The Challenger falls over, but quickly rights himself. The big ball misses by a few feet off our bow, falling to the earth.

Straw Man hurls another! This one is coming right at us!

I raise the magnet and cry out: "Push!" while nearly losing my balance, the moving ground far beneath us making me dizzy. The ball stops mid-air and then falls backwards towards the Straw-Man's ship, missing by as close as that last ball had missed us by.

I move towards the stern of the ship, grabbing the short wooden rail. The Challenger is a few feet from me. Fauna, I see, is gradually bringing our vessel upward towards the clouds. Below I see the Old Campus passing from sight.

"Fauna!" I call to her, that slug in my head helping me recall something. "Steer us away from the setting sun and away from Northsphere!"

I feel the vessel turn slightly, rising and curving, and then I see the sun as it slowly descends in purple sky and in the distance the city of Northsphere, the tall pearly towers and turrets and the Northern Sea beyond. The second ship follows us, the Straw Man grumbling as he steers the ship. He reaches for the last cannonball.

I raise my magnet and command: "Down, hard!"

As the big man brings the black ball up his palm, it suddenly drops out of his fingers and with great force plunks into the wooden deck behind his feet. The blonde aggressor curses loudly, twisting his head, seeing that the ship's hull has a gaping hole. I remember that these flying ships sink if they take on too much air! And so the vessel stops moving and plummets to the earth!

The Challenger laughs, slapping my shoulder. Fauna slows the ship slightly and turns her head to see what's going on. She smiles. I don't. I scream at her to speed up!

The Straw Man leaps, his legs pushing him off the fast falling ship, bringing his great sprawling body towards us, arms out-stretched. Fauna swears, trying to move, too late.

The boat shakes. Two immense hands grasp the stern. The front of the ship tilts upward, Fauna nearly sliding down, managing to grip the levers to keep her steady. I fall, smacking into the wall of the deck at the back, the two big hands inches from me.

The Challenger springs to action, slicing at the hands rapidly while the Straw Man pulls himself upward. I duck out of the way of the ranger's slashing sword, just in time to see one hand reach for the Challenger, grabbing him by one leg. The Challenger falls, but not before taking his sword in both hands and plunging it at the Straw Man's nearest shoulder.

The foe cries out and falls from our ship, losing his grip, not letting go of the Challenger in his one hand though, taking him with him.

I hastily get back to my feet and rush to the end of the ship, which has re-balanced itself on the air. "Pull! Grab!" I nearly spit the words, the mighty magnet in both hands; my two feet pressed against the wall of the stern's deck as I lean the rest of my body over.

Beneath me the Challenger's sword's tip is attached to the ends of the magnet. The Straw Man dangles underneath him, legs kicking at empty air, a great field of grass far below. It's so heavy! I feel my arms, shoulders, and back aching in great pain! If I don't let go I fear my arms will break off.

"I can't hold!" I manage to shriek to the Challenger.

"Die orphan!" roars the Straw Man, slobbering as he tries to reach with his other hand.

"No!" yells the Challenger and he starts kicking the Straw Man's monstrous face. "I have had enough—"

He kicks again. "—of you—"

He kicks one last time. "—and your ridiculous arguments!"

The last foot to the face causes the Straw Man to lose his grip, the strength of the Challenger, though weaker than the Straw Man, just enough to send him down. I pull my ranger friend

upward and he side-flips onto the deck, both of us gazing down at the sight of the Straw Man falling, limbs spinning as he cries out.

He lands, maybe one hundred or so feet beneath us, with a great crash onto the open field below. I see grasses everywhere in the light of the dusk, a great field.

The Straw Man looks wounded, but he gets up, small as he is from this height. I feel a pit grow in my belly. I know what's going to happen. He's going to jump.

"Bloody..." the Challenger harshly whispers. Fauna speeds our ship, but it looks like it might not be enough.

The Straw Man places his arms behind his back, crouching, ready to give a great leap towards us and we brace ourselves.

Then the grasses start moving frantically beneath his feet.

I can see it, the whole field begins shifting, at first the grasses closest to him and then the rest of the field. All the grasses flutter, looking at first like there are creatures moving within them. But it's not creatures, it's the grass itself!

The Straw Man's face turns from rage to terror. He screams and waves his arms above his head.

His legs are stuck. Blood spills out from under him, his feet vanishing into the grasses. He looks beneath him, seeing now that his legs are being devoured.

"Killer Grass!" I yell and I slap the Challenger's back.

The Straw Man falls, half of him consumed already, still waving his arms, screaming in horror. All around the grasses reach for him, the little blades closest to him biting and tearing his flesh in a mad fury, sending bits and chunks of him about the field. His arms fall to his sides only to be grabbed by the Killer Grass, his fingers, hands, arms and shoulders quickly eaten, the last thing we see from the distance is his face, and the long blonde straw-like strands of hair that the Killer Grasses envelope in seconds.

The Challenger and I fall onto the floor of the deck and Fauna puts the ship into high speed, zipping over the fields of deadly grass-blades, moving eastward towards new lands.

"He's gone," sighs the Challenger, slightly smiling. He looks to me and thanks both of us.

"We're a team!" Fauna shouts back to him. "And now we have this flying ship to continue our adventures!"

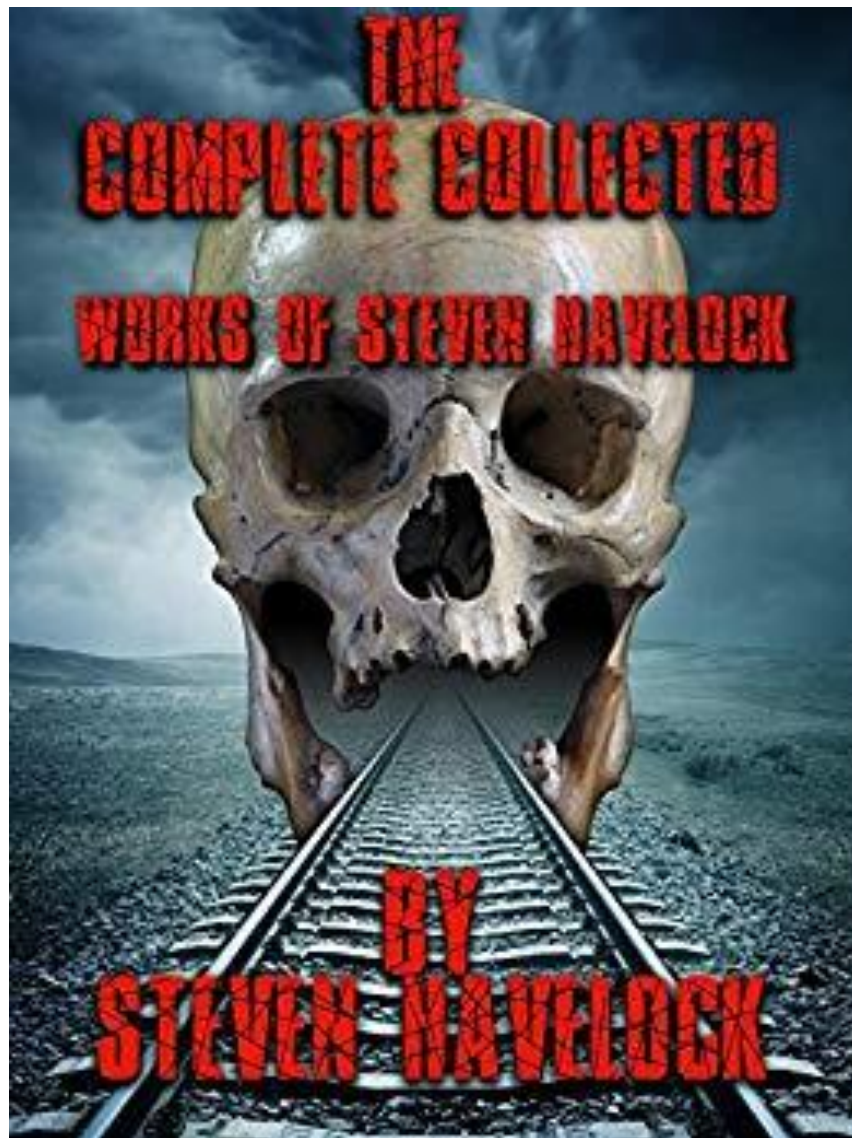
The two of us stand up and step over to Fauna's side, all of us grinning as the air whooshes in our faces and night finally comes. We had another adventure, another quest, and I have two new

items and a strange slug in my head that I probably need to have looked at. But for now, I'm enjoying my newly recalled knowledge.

After all, knowledge is power.

The adventure continues...

THE END... FOR NOW!



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‘Wanii!’ Aajika exclaimed huskily.

The young she looked sullenly down at them. Bruises mottled her bare skin. Aajika held her hands out in supplication, Kursaal crouched like a predator about to spring. Aajika gave him a stern look, then climbed out of the hollow and went to speak with her sister.

‘Wanii,’ she repeated, ‘I’m so glad.’

‘You thought I was dead?’ the girl asked. Aajika nodded wordlessly. ‘You abandoned me,’ Wanii added. ‘You and... that!’

She pointed a slim paw at Kursaal, who glared balefully up at her.

Aajika took her sister’s hands, but Wanii struggled away. ‘How did you escape?’ Aajika wanted to know. ‘I thought you were in the airship when it crashed.’

Wanii rubbed at her bruises. ‘I was,’ she said. ‘We all were. I was knocked out, I suppose. When I came to I found the airship no longer plummeting. All was dark, and half the cabin was flooded. I found other survivors, and we half climbed and half swam out of the airship, then made it to the bank as the rains came down.’

‘Did you find shelter?’ asked Aajika with a sister’s concern.

‘We did,’ said Wanii. She glanced from Aajika to Kursaal, then at the cave in the roots where they had sheltered. ‘When it ended, I came out to see if anyone else had escaped the wreck, leaving the others where they were.’

‘Did you see any sign of the Terrans?’ Kursaal asked, rising to his feet. Wanii did not answer.

‘Wanii?’ said Aajika gently. ‘Was there any sign of the Terrans? Did they survive the wreck?’

Wanii shrugged. ‘I saw no sign of them in the cabin,’ she said, ‘but it was dark and flooded. When I came out of the place where we sheltered, I thought I saw figures moving through the trees, wading away through the water. I was about to call out to them, but then I saw that they were pale of skin.’

Kursaal growled. ‘Then Yek-Zerab may have survived,’ he said, climbing up to join them. ‘Where are the others? We should return to the Crag as soon as possible.’

Still Wanii refused to answer him. Aajika nodded. ‘That’s a good idea, Kursaal,’ she said. ‘Wanii, take us to the others.’

Sullenly, Wanii led them to another tree. Faces peered up from the gloom beneath the roots. Kursaal recognised three more of the ex-slaves, green-black skinned Venusians of the Crag Folk. He greeted them, and they climbed out to meet him.

‘We must go north,’ he told them. ‘North to the Crag. If any of the warriors survived the retreat, that is where they will be.’

As they sloshed their way through fetid swamp waters, seething with repellent life, heading towards the higher ground, a plume of smoke could be seen through the jivnik trees to the south. Kursaal knew that this must mark the still burning floating island of the Deathcaps. There was no sign of their people, and no sign of the Terrans, although they passed quite close to the wreck of the airship. Soon, however, the ground beneath their feet became firmer. They began to ascend a slope, and the waters receded. At last they reached the familiar blue mould that lay beneath the spreading caps of the purple mushrooms. Here they rested, and took stock of their situation. Although Wanii was still sullen and resentful, the other freed slaves looked up to Kursaal as a leader. Aajika spoke more than he did, but his very taciturnity seemed to increase his authority in their eyes.

‘We will go north,’ he told the others. ‘Keep your eyes open for reptile predators. Even now we are on our own home ground, we are still not safe. Until we reach the caves beneath the Crag can we count ourselves safe. But we are out of the worst of it now. Rest a while. Wanii, Aajika, you must take it in turns to watch after me. Sleep now, if you wish.’

He went to a hummock from which he could keep an eye on the surrounding mushroom forest. Wanii refused to meet his eye, but Aajika nodded. He watched until he was feeling sleepy, then went back to the huddle of sleeping forms beneath the biggest mushroom, and woke Wanii.

She sprang awake with a muffled cry, and shrank away from him. He stared at her in bafflement.

‘Your turn to go on watch,’ he said. ‘Wake Aajika when you are sleepy.’

She stalked away in silence. Shrugging, Kursaal went to curl up with the others.

Aajika woke him later. She had completed her watch after Wanii. Her sister had reported nothing but winged reptiles flying overhead. No airships, no Deathcaps. The mushroom forest was silent. Even folk of the Tribe seemed to be scarce. Kursaal was troubled. Even if the warriors of the Tribe had been defeated, the women and children should be present in the forest, gathering food for the next meal. It was eerie.

They all awoke, and soon they were making their way north through the forest. Grey skies above the canopy threatened rain, but it never came.

The ground grew steeper. Kursaal now had a clearer picture of the lie of the land of his birth, gained in the cabin of the airship. The mushroom forest grew on the uplands above the jivnik infested sump of water near the coast. North of it were the mountains. It must be the best land for many miles. No wonder the coast dwelling Deathcaps coveted their folk as slaves. Their own

existence must be precarious, based on fishing and slaving.

These mushroom forests were rich, the mushrooms themselves, and even some of the toadstools, providing food and fibres for weaving, and fuel when their flesh was dried. The herds of face-horns and other reptiles provided more food, as did the many mosses that carpeted the forest floor. It was a rich land, and Kursaal was proud of his country and his people. But the defeat by the airborne forces of the Terran invaders would not count in their favour. He felt that a long fight lay ahead of his people, a fight for supremacy over the savage tribes of the coastal regions and the lands between shore and mountain.

As he strode on, at the head of the tattered band of freed slaves, he felt proud of his people, proud of himself. He prayed to the Great Spirit Herself that he would be privileged enough to lead them in their struggle against the rival tribes.

Much later, after a long and wearisome journey, they came out of the mushroom forest to see the Crag rising before them. Kursaal paused at the edge of the mushrooms and surveyed the scene. Smoke rose from the open space in front of the main cave, and he could hear the distant sound of people in heated discussion.

‘It must be a great gathering,’ said Aajika. ‘All the clans of the Tribe must have been called. That is why the forest was so empty.’

‘Why has a gathering been called?’ asked Kursaal. ‘They are called only once in a score of days. I barely remember the last one.’

He had been a cub then. Now he was a man. He had hunted, fought, killed men. And—his face softened as he looked at Aajika—known the embrace of the she he loved.

She bit her lip. ‘It must be because of what has happened,’ she said. ‘The Tribe will have much to discuss.’

‘Come,’ said Kursaal decisively. ‘We will see what we can contribute.’

He led his people out of the forest and up to the cave. Tribesfolk looked up from the fires round which they sat, deep in discussion, and radiated surprise. Vadodara the Shaman was presiding over the debate, while Kursaal’s father Tolkaan sat at his side. Kursaal was shocked by how few warriors were present. Had all been killed during the retreat?

‘Greetings, folk of the Crag,’ he said striding in amongst them, the others at his back. ‘I am Kursaal, son of Tolkaan the Elder. I return, and I bring with me the slaves who the Deathcaps stole from our lands.’

He folded his arms over his brawny chest and gazed proudly around him.

‘Cub,’ growled his father. ‘We thought you would not return. Why did you remain when the command was given to withdraw?’

‘Withdraw?’ Kursaal sneered. ‘Flee, you mean. You call me cub, father, but I am a grown man. And I did not run like a beaten reptile, my tail between my scaled legs. I fought for my folk, I delivered my people from slavery. I have flown in the heavens and fought invaders from beyond this world. What have you done, father?’

An awed murmur went through the gathered Tribesfolk. Tolkaan looked uncomfortable. Vadodara pursed his lips.

‘These are vaunting words, Kursaal,’ he said in reproof. ‘You must learn to treat your elders with more respect.’

‘Respect?’ Kursaal growled. ‘Respect must be earned. What respect can I have for you, O Shaman, who sits by the fires like a weak woman big with child, when true men must fight and die for the Tribe? What respect can I have for my own father, who runs from the field when I remain, when I free my people single handed? My father and the other elders led the Tribe to defeat. I say he should step down, and let me lead the Tribe—to victory!’

As the Tribesfolk muttered to each other Tolkaan rose and came round the fire. He looked round at the gathered men, women and cubs.

‘My son speaks many words,’ he said. ‘He says much about himself. But he is not fit to lead the Tribe. I say that and I am his father!’

Kursaal spat into the fire. ‘You say that because I threaten your power,’ he ranted. ‘You say that because you know that age must give way to youth. Your day is done. It was over when you fled the fight, when I, who had just reached manhood by hunting my first face-horn, remained and rescued my people.’

‘We hear much of this rescue,’ said Vadodara, also rising. ‘But who did you rescue? A few cubs, it seems.’

‘I see one was the she you were lusting after, too,’ Tolkaan snarled. A shocked murmur went through the gathered Tribesfolk. ‘Aye,’ he said in vicious triumph, casting searching looks at the gathering. ‘Has our great hero told you yet that he would break all custom? That he would take a she from the Tribe as his mate?’

The noise from the Tribe was ugly. Kursaal looked around in desperation. He had not thought his father would fight back so cruelly. Aajika returned his gaze, eyes wide with guilt. But what could any of the Tribe prove?

But Vadodara turned on Tolkaan now. ‘I cannot believe that,’ he said. ‘I cannot believe that a son of Tolkaan would break custom so vilely.’

‘Oh, but he would,’ came a soft voice that nevertheless carried through the hubbub. ‘I saw them!’

Heads turned. Aajika's face paled. Wanii stepped into the circle of the campfires, her head held high. She pointed an accusing finger at Kursaal.

'I saw him, lying with my sister,' she shrieked. 'They were beneath the roots of a great jivnik tree. They had been sheltering from the rains, I suppose. They lay together naked.'

'Like a man with his mate?' Vadodara said in horror. The Tribe muttered.

She nodded firmly. 'I tell you I saw them!'

'She lies!' wept Aajika. 'She couldn't have seen us! She...' She put her hand to her mouth. Now she had betrayed them herself.

Kursaal stood alone in the midst of his tribe. Feelings were ugly. The defeat had left many feeling angry and with no target for their wrath. Now he was there, a sinner, a breaker of custom and tradition and law. He had been so puffed up with pride, so sure that he could lead the Tribe to a glorious future, that he had never thought he could be brought down like this. Just as the Terran airship had risen so high only to plummet into the stinking depths of the swamp, now he too had fallen from grace.

His father turned his back on him. He addressed the Tribe. 'No son of mine! No son of mine would lie with a girl of the Tribe as if she was his mate! My son would display his prowess by carrying off the most beautiful girl of another tribe to dwell with him in his cave and bear his sons—just as I did when I was little more than a cub. Kursaal—I will not sully my mouth with his name. He must be cast out of the Tribe!'

Kursaal looked about him in horror. The mood of the Tribe now favoured his father's stern pronouncement. Wanii watched in malicious satisfaction. Aajika wept.

'It is for me to pass sentence,' declared Vadodara, drawing himself up, 'not the cub's father. I agree that Kursaal has been found guilty of crimes against tribal custom. He must be punished for this. His fond dreams of leading the Tribe can be disregarded. It will be long before he has put this behind him.'

'Come away from him, child,' he instructed Aajika, and the girl meekly crossed the cave to join the women of the Tribe, and Wanii went with her, smirking one last time over her shoulder. Kursaal watched her go, heart torn. 'Kursaal,' the Shaman added, 'This is my judgement. For your sin, for your breaking of custom, for your lusting after a girl of the Tribe, you will be cast out. You will no longer be welcomed at the campfires of the Tribe.'

'Indeed,' growled Tolkaan, but his face was softening a little now. 'But has my son no hope of redemption? What can he do to make himself welcome amongst his people?'

Kursaal went to the mouth of the cave. 'Do not beg for me, father,' he said sternly. 'The decision is made. I am banished.' His eyes wandered over to Aajika, but she would not meet his gaze. 'I

must go. I shall never return.'

'You will not go until you are dismissed,' Tolkaan growled. He turned to Vadodara. 'Well, Shaman? How may my son redeem himself?'

'He may return,' declared the Shaman, 'when he brings back a mate.'

Aajika gasped, then hid her face.

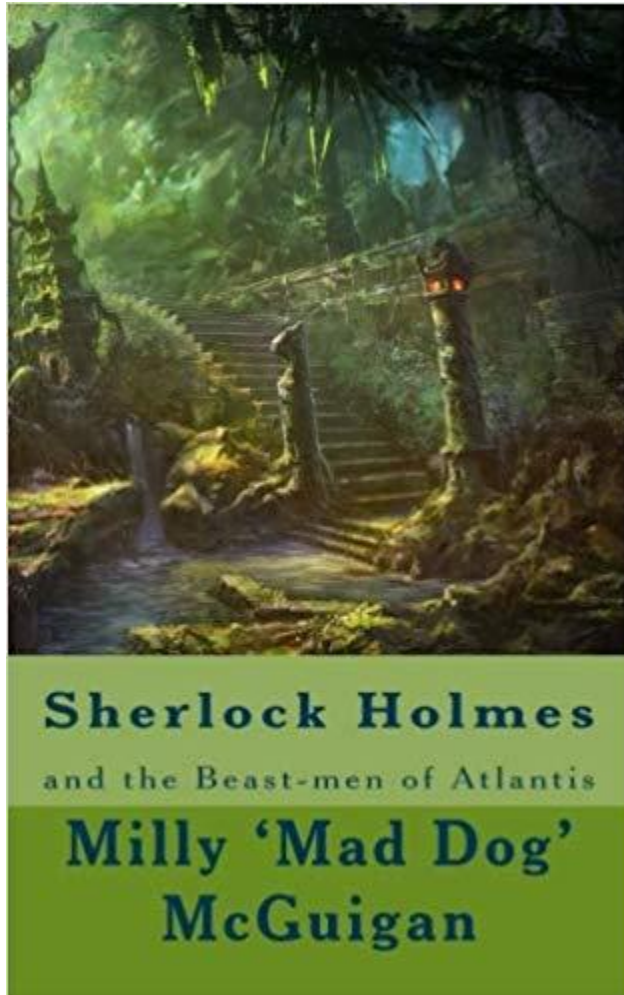
'But no ordinary mate,' said Vadodara. 'He must bring back a mate who will bring honour to the Tribe, which has lost much of its accustomed dignity this day. I declare that he must bring back to the Tribe as mate one such as the queen of the Hive Folk, who it is said dwells amidst the plains of the East, in the greatest of the great nests, guarded by many drone warriors. Only when he brings a mate of her standing back to his cave will he be reaccepted into the Tribe.'

Kursaal looked around at his people. The task they had set would have been impossible for a raiding party.

Without speaking, he strode from the cave.

THE END

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Thirty-Eight

The docks on this asteroid were small and poorly maintained. Mud's ship, the "Charon" was too large to dock there, so he landed his ship on the surface of the asteroid, and paid for a shuttle to take him to the asteroid's main landing bays.

Which gave Rat some comfort. A receipt was tendered, and a record him taking the shuttle with Mud back to the "Charon" was logged in the shuttle's computers. That, and the video record of the short trip made it all a little bit less likely that Rat might disappear, if the deal went south.

The "Charon" was landed near a handful of other interplanetary ships, and grew large as the shuttle approached it. Rat was impressed. Not a large ship, it was yet big enough to comfortably carry a crew of a dozen hands. But Mud, like Ward, flew alone, except that Mud often carried passengers as well as cargo. The "Charon" was also tricked out with a number of decorative elements most uncharacteristic of space travellers.

Remotely, from within the shuttle, Mud opened the cargo bay door of the "Charon", which easily accommodated the small four-seater shuttle craft. The shuttle slid easily into the cargo bay, and came to a stop. Again remotely, Mud closed the cargo bay door. Once inside his ship, Mud hopped out of the shuttle and waved to Rat.

"Come on in witch," he said, with a happy and disarming grin.

"Awrite," Rat said. He climbed cautiously out of the shuttle and into the cargo bay of the "Charon".

Bidding the small shuttle craft farewell, Mud led Rat into the storage bay forward of the cargo bay. Chatting breezily, Mud led Rat to a cabinet.

"This it?" Rat asked, eyes gleaming with anticipation.

"That and a few other knickknacks," Mud answered. He opened the cabinet. Rat peered inside.

Without a word, Mud spun about on his heel and swung his huge fist squarely into Rat's face. Rat was knocked unconscious by the blow. His body sailed, spinning, across the storage bay. It only came to a stop when it slammed hard against the far bulkhead.

Minutes later, when he roused himself, he opened his eyes to find himself staring directly down the barrel of Mud's quantum pistol.

Rat was hardly amused.

"The fuck...?" he stuttered.

“Yeah...” Mud replied, scowling. “The fuck.”

When Mud smiled, he could brighten a darkened room. But when he scowled, the large, bearded face presented a most intimidating visage.

“Whyn’cha tell me everything you can about Lacey, eh? The more you got to tell me, the longer you got to live.”

“I dunno shit,” Rat scowled.

“A pity, that.”

Mud gave Rat another solid punch in the head.

Again, Rat woke up after several moments had passed.

“Look,” Rat said. “I dunno shit. And I got friends. They’ll know where I disappeared and when. So count yer blessings now. Call the shuttle back, and I’ll get off, and you can get your ass the hell outta town, bitch. While you can.”

A third solid punch from Mud. When Rat awoke for the third time, blood was running from his nose and down his face. It made long rivulets on his jumpsuit, down to his waist.

Rat opened his eyes and gave his head a shake. Droplets of blood spun away and floated in the air, until they finally settled on the floor or spattered against a bulkhead. He found Mud sitting on a crate, a fat black cigar clenched in his teeth.

Mud pulled the cigar out of his mouth and grinned at Rat.

“I dunno if you got any friends or not,” he said, “But if you ever wanna see `em again, ya better start talkin’”.

“So what? Who’s Lacey to you, and why do you care?” Rat demanded.

Mud slowly shook his head with a mock weariness. Standing up from the crate, he began to step up to where Rat was sprawled out upon the floor.

He aimed his pistol at Rat’s feet.

“I got all the time in the world,” he said. “All the time I need. I think I’ll start with the left foot and...”

He was interrupted by an incoming message on his wristband.

It was Hardy’s voice coming in.

“Hiya, Mud. How’s it all going?”

“We’re makin’ some progress here,” Mud answered. “But it looks like some slow going ahead.”

“Ah. I see. Well (carefully avoiding using any names), we’re out here in the shuttle. You want to let us in?”

“Sure thing, buddy.”

Moments later, Rat found himself surrounded by Mud, Hardy and Illara. Illara, with grey and penetrating eyes, stared at Rat with a grim smile.

“So this is him, huh?” she asked.

“Yup,” Mud answered. “I been gettin’ `im softened up a bit for ya.”

“How nice,” Illara replied. She gave Rat a bright smile while Hardy, his laser pistol unholstered and in his hand, walked around Rat to stand somewhat beside and behind him, but out of his field of view.

“I’m gonna head to the cockpit, kids,” Mud said to Hardy and Illara. “Play nice.”

Illara and Hardy both laughed. Rat said nothing.

Mud left the storage bay, while Illara and Hardy stood guard over Rat, saying nothing. The silence was heavy and, to Rat, dreadful.

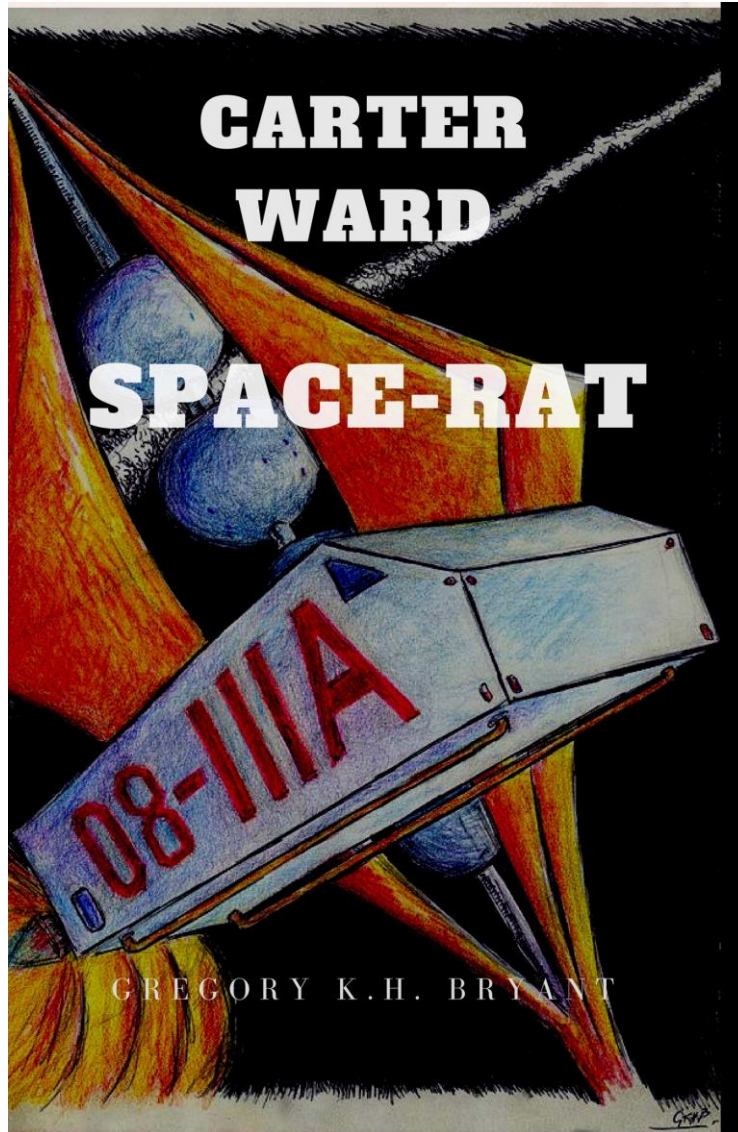
A few moments later, the ship’s engines began to rev. Rat’s face sank in horror as he understood the implications of what he was feeling and hearing.

“Wha... what? Where are we going?” he demanded.

Illara and Hardy said nothing. Illara gave Rat a smile that terrified him.

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

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THE LOST WORLD by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Chapter XIV: "Those Were the Real Conquests"

We had imagined that our pursuers, the ape-men, knew nothing of our brush-wood hiding-place, but we were soon to find out our mistake. There was no sound in the woods—not a leaf moved upon the trees, and all was peace around us—but we should have been warned by our first experience how cunningly and how patiently these creatures can watch and wait until their chance comes. Whatever fate may be mine through life, I am very sure that I shall never be nearer death than I was that morning. But I will tell you the thing in its due order.

We all awoke exhausted after the terrific emotions and scanty food of yesterday. Summerlee was still so weak that it was an effort for him to stand; but the old man was full of a sort of surly courage which would never admit defeat. A council was held, and it was agreed that we should wait quietly for an hour or two where we were, have our much-needed breakfast, and then make our way across the plateau and round the central lake to the caves where my observations had shown that the Indians lived. We relied upon the fact that we could count upon the good word of those whom we had rescued to ensure a warm welcome from their fellows. Then, with our mission accomplished and possessing a fuller knowledge of the secrets of Maple White Land, we should turn our whole thoughts to the vital problem of our escape and return. Even Challenger was ready to admit that we should then have done all for which we had come, and that our first duty from that time onwards was to carry back to civilization the amazing discoveries we had made.

We were able now to take a more leisurely view of the Indians whom we had rescued. They were small men, wiry, active, and well-built, with lank black hair tied up in a bunch behind their heads with a leathern thong, and leathern also were their loin-clothes. Their faces were hairless, well formed, and good-humoured. The lobes of their ears, hanging ragged and bloody, showed that they had been pierced for some ornaments which their captors had torn out. Their speech, though unintelligible to us, was fluent among themselves, and as they pointed to each other and uttered the word "Accala" many times over, we gathered that this was the name of the nation. Occasionally, with faces which were convulsed with fear and hatred, they shook their clenched hands at the woods round and cried: "Doda! Doda!" which was surely their term for their enemies.

"What do you make of them, Challenger?" asked Lord John. "One thing is very clear to me, and that is that the little chap with the front of his head shaved is a chief among them."

It was indeed evident that this man stood apart from the others, and that they never ventured to address him without every sign of deep respect. He seemed to be the youngest of them all, and yet, so proud and high was his spirit that, upon Challenger laying his great hand upon his head, he started like a spurred horse and, with a quick flash of his dark eyes, moved further away from the Professor. Then, placing his hand upon his breast and holding himself with great dignity, he uttered the word "Maretas" several times. The Professor, unabashed, seized the nearest Indian by the shoulder and proceeded to lecture upon him as if he were a potted specimen in a class-room.

“The type of these people,” said he in his sonorous fashion, “whether judged by cranial capacity, facial angle, or any other test, cannot be regarded as a low one; on the contrary, we must place it as considerably higher in the scale than many South American tribes which I can mention. On no possible supposition can we explain the evolution of such a race in this place. For that matter, so great a gap separates these ape-men from the primitive animals which have survived upon this plateau, that it is inadmissible to think that they could have developed where we find them.”

“Then where the dooce did they drop from?” asked Lord John.

“A question which will, no doubt, be eagerly discussed in every scientific society in Europe and America,” the Professor answered. “My own reading of the situation for what it is worth—” he inflated his chest enormously and looked insolently around him at the words—”is that evolution has advanced under the peculiar conditions of this country up to the vertebrate stage, the old types surviving and living on in company with the newer ones. Thus we find such modern creatures as the tapir—an animal with quite a respectable length of pedigree—the great deer, and the ant-eater in the companionship of reptilian forms of Jurassic type. So much is clear. And now come the ape-men and the Indian. What is the scientific mind to think of their presence? I can only account for it by an invasion from outside. It is probable that there existed an anthropoid ape in South America, who in past ages found his way to this place, and that he developed into the creatures we have seen, some of which”—here he looked hard at me—”were of an appearance and shape which, if it had been accompanied by corresponding intelligence, would, I do not hesitate to say, have reflected credit upon any living race. As to the Indians I cannot doubt that they are more recent immigrants from below. Under the stress of famine or of conquest they have made their way up here. Faced by ferocious creatures which they had never before seen, they took refuge in the caves which our young friend has described, but they have no doubt had a bitter fight to hold their own against wild beasts, and especially against the ape-men who would regard them as intruders, and wage a merciless war upon them with a cunning which the larger beasts would lack. Hence the fact that their numbers appear to be limited. Well, gentlemen, have I read you the riddle aright, or is there any point which you would query?”

Professor Summerlee for once was too depressed to argue, though he shook his head violently as a token of general disagreement. Lord John merely scratched his scanty locks with the remark that he couldn’t put up a fight as he wasn’t in the same weight or class. For my own part I performed my usual role of bringing things down to a strictly prosaic and practical level by the remark that one of the Indians was missing.

“He has gone to fetch some water,” said Lord Roxton. “We fitted him up with an empty beef tin and he is off.”

“To the old camp?” I asked.

“No, to the brook. It’s among the trees there. It can’t be more than a couple of hundred yards. But the beggar is certainly taking his time.”

“I’ll go and look after him,” said I. I picked up my rifle and strolled in the direction of the brook, leaving my friends to lay out the scanty breakfast. It may seem to you rash that even for so short

a distance I should quit the shelter of our friendly thicket, but you will remember that we were many miles from Ape-town, that so far as we knew the creatures had not discovered our retreat, and that in any case with a rifle in my hands I had no fear of them. I had not yet learned their cunning or their strength.

I could hear the murmur of our brook somewhere ahead of me, but there was a tangle of trees and brushwood between me and it. I was making my way through this at a point which was just out of sight of my companions, when, under one of the trees, I noticed something red huddled among the bushes. As I approached it, I was shocked to see that it was the dead body of the missing Indian. He lay upon his side, his limbs drawn up, and his head screwed round at a most unnatural angle, so that he seemed to be looking straight over his own shoulder. I gave a cry to warn my friends that something was amiss, and running forwards I stooped over the body. Surely my guardian angel was very near me then, for some instinct of fear, or it may have been some faint rustle of leaves, made me glance upwards. Out of the thick green foliage which hung low over my head, two long muscular arms covered with reddish hair were slowly descending. Another instant and the great stealthy hands would have been round my throat. I sprang backwards, but quick as I was, those hands were quicker still. Through my sudden spring they missed a fatal grip, but one of them caught the back of my neck and the other one my face. I threw my hands up to protect my throat, and the next moment the huge paw had slid down my face and closed over them. I was lifted lightly from the ground, and I felt an intolerable pressure forcing my head back and back until the strain upon the cervical spine was more than I could bear. My senses swam, but I still tore at the hand and forced it out from my chin. Looking up I saw a frightful face with cold inexorable light blue eyes looking down into mine. There was something hypnotic in those terrible eyes. I could struggle no longer. As the creature felt me grow limp in his grasp, two white canines gleamed for a moment at each side of the vile mouth, and the grip tightened still more upon my chin, forcing it always upwards and back. A thin, oval-tinted mist formed before my eyes and little silvery bells tinkled in my ears. Dully and far off I heard the crack of a rifle and was feebly aware of the shock as I was dropped to the earth, where I lay without sense or motion.

I awoke to find myself on my back upon the grass in our lair within the thicket. Someone had brought the water from the brook, and Lord John was sprinkling my head with it, while Challenger and Summerlee were propping me up, with concern in their faces. For a moment I had a glimpse of the human spirits behind their scientific masks. It was really shock, rather than any injury, which had prostrated me, and in half-an-hour, in spite of aching head and stiff neck, I was sitting up and ready for anything.

“But you’ve had the escape of your life, young fella my lad,” said Lord Roxton. “When I heard your cry and ran forward, and saw your head twisted half-off and your stohwassers kickin’ in the air, I thought we were one short. I missed the beast in my flurry, but he dropped you all right and was off like a streak. By George! I wish I had fifty men with rifles. I’d clear out the whole infernal gang of them and leave this country a bit cleaner than we found it.”

It was clear now that the ape-men had in some way marked us down, and that we were watched on every side. We had not so much to fear from them during the day, but they would be very likely to rush us by night; so the sooner we got away from their neighbourhood the better. On

three sides of us was absolute forest, and there we might find ourselves in an ambush. But on the fourth side—that which sloped down in the direction of the lake—there was only low scrub, with scattered trees and occasional open glades. It was, in fact, the route which I had myself taken in my solitary journey, and it led us straight for the Indian caves. This then must for every reason be our road.

One great regret we had, and that was to leave our old camp behind us, not only for the sake of the stores which remained there, but even more because we were losing touch with Zambo, our link with the outside world. However, we had a fair supply of cartridges and all our guns, so, for a time at least, we could look after ourselves, and we hoped soon to have a chance of returning and restoring our communications with our negro. He had faithfully promised to stay where he was, and we had not a doubt that he would be as good as his word.

It was in the early afternoon that we started upon our journey. The young chief walked at our head as our guide, but refused indignantly to carry any burden. Behind him came the two surviving Indians with our scanty possessions upon their backs. We four white men walked in the rear with rifles loaded and ready. As we started there broke from the thick silent woods behind us a sudden great ululation of the ape-men, which may have been a cheer of triumph at our departure or a jeer of contempt at our flight. Looking back we saw only the dense screen of trees, but that long-drawn yell told us how many of our enemies lurked among them. We saw no sign of pursuit, however, and soon we had got into more open country and beyond their power.

As I tramped along, the rearmost of the four, I could not help smiling at the appearance of my three companions in front. Was this the luxurious Lord John Roxton who had sat that evening in the Albany amidst his Persian rugs and his pictures in the pink radiance of the tinted lights? And was this the imposing Professor who had swelled behind the great desk in his massive study at Enmore Park? And, finally, could this be the austere and prim figure which had risen before the meeting at the Zoological Institute? No three tramps that one could have met in a Surrey lane could have looked more hopeless and bedraggled. We had, it is true, been only a week or so upon the top of the plateau, but all our spare clothing was in our camp below, and the one week had been a severe one upon us all, though least to me who had not to endure the handling of the ape-men. My three friends had all lost their hats, and had now bound handkerchiefs round their heads, their clothes hung in ribbons about them, and their unshaven grimy faces were hardly to be recognized. Both Summerlee and Challenger were limping heavily, while I still dragged my feet from weakness after the shock of the morning, and my neck was as stiff as a board from the murderous grip that held it. We were indeed a sorry crew, and I did not wonder to see our Indian companions glance back at us occasionally with horror and amazement on their faces.

In the late afternoon we reached the margin of the lake, and as we emerged from the bush and saw the sheet of water stretching before us our native friends set up a shrill cry of joy and pointed eagerly in front of them. It was indeed a wonderful sight which lay before us. Sweeping over the glassy surface was a great flotilla of canoes coming straight for the shore upon which we stood. They were some miles out when we first saw them, but they shot forward with great swiftness, and were soon so near that the rowers could distinguish our persons. Instantly a thunderous shout of delight burst from them, and we saw them rise from their seats, waving their paddles and spears madly in the air. Then bending to their work once more, they flew across the

intervening water, beached their boats upon the sloping sand, and rushed up to us, prostrating themselves with loud cries of greeting before the young chief. Finally one of them, an elderly man, with a necklace and bracelet of great lustrous glass beads and the skin of some beautiful mottled amber-coloured animal slung over his shoulders, ran forward and embraced most tenderly the youth whom we had saved. He then looked at us and asked some questions, after which he stepped up with much dignity and embraced us also each in turn. Then, at his order, the whole tribe lay down upon the ground before us in homage. Personally I felt shy and uncomfortable at this obsequious adoration, and I read the same feeling in the faces of Roxton and Summerlee, but Challenger expanded like a flower in the sun.

“They may be undeveloped types,” said he, stroking his beard and looking round at them, “but their deportment in the presence of their superiors might be a lesson to some of our more advanced Europeans. Strange how correct are the instincts of the natural man!”

It was clear that the natives had come out upon the war-path, for every man carried his spear—a long bamboo tipped with bone—his bow and arrows, and some sort of club or stone battle-axe slung at his side. Their dark, angry glances at the woods from which we had come, and the frequent repetition of the word “Doda,” made it clear enough that this was a rescue party who had set forth to save or revenge the old chief’s son, for such we gathered that the youth must be. A council was now held by the whole tribe squatting in a circle, whilst we sat near on a slab of basalt and watched their proceedings. Two or three warriors spoke, and finally our young friend made a spirited harangue with such eloquent features and gestures that we could understand it all as clearly as if we had known his language.

“What is the use of returning?” he said. “Sooner or later the thing must be done. Your comrades have been murdered. What if I have returned safe? These others have been done to death. There is no safety for any of us. We are assembled now and ready.” Then he pointed to us. “These strange men are our friends. They are great fighters, and they hate the ape-men even as we do. They command,” here he pointed up to heaven, “the thunder and the lightning. When shall we have such a chance again? Let us go forward, and either die now or live for the future in safety. How else shall we go back unashamed to our women?”

The little red warriors hung upon the words of the speaker, and when he had finished they burst into a roar of applause, waving their rude weapons in the air. The old chief stepped forward to us, and asked us some questions, pointing at the same time to the woods. Lord John made a sign to him that he should wait for an answer and then he turned to us.

“Well, it’s up to you to say what you will do,” said he; “for my part I have a score to settle with these monkey-folk, and if it ends by wiping them off the face of the earth I don’t see that the earth need fret about it. I’m goin’ with our little red pals and I mean to see them through the scrap. What do you say, young fellah?”

“Of course I will come.”

“And you, Challenger?”

“I will assuredly co-operate.”

“And you, Summerlee?”

“We seem to be drifting very far from the object of this expedition, Lord John. I assure you that I little thought when I left my professional chair in London that it was for the purpose of heading a raid of savages upon a colony of anthropoid apes.”

“To such base uses do we come,” said Lord John, smiling. “But we are up against it, so what’s the decision?”

“It seems a most questionable step,” said Summerlee, argumentative to the last, “but if you are all going, I hardly see how I can remain behind.”

“Then it is settled,” said Lord John, and turning to the chief he nodded and slapped his rifle.

The old fellow clasped our hands, each in turn, while his men cheered louder than ever. It was too late to advance that night, so the Indians settled down into a rude bivouac. On all sides their fires began to glimmer and smoke. Some of them who had disappeared into the jungle came back presently driving a young iguanodon before them. Like the others, it had a daub of asphalt upon its shoulder, and it was only when we saw one of the natives step forward with the air of an owner and give his consent to the beast’s slaughter that we understood at last that these great creatures were as much private property as a herd of cattle, and that these symbols which had so perplexed us were nothing more than the marks of the owner. Helpless, torpid, and vegetarian, with great limbs but a minute brain, they could be rounded up and driven by a child. In a few minutes the huge beast had been cut up and slabs of him were hanging over a dozen camp fires, together with great scaly ganoid fish which had been speared in the lake.

Summerlee had lain down and slept upon the sand, but we others roamed round the edge of the water, seeking to learn something more of this strange country. Twice we found pits of blue clay, such as we had already seen in the swamp of the pterodactyls. These were old volcanic vents, and for some reason excited the greatest interest in Lord John. What attracted Challenger, on the other hand, was a bubbling, gurgling mud geyser, where some strange gas formed great bursting bubbles upon the surface. He thrust a hollow reed into it and cried out with delight like a schoolboy then he was able, on touching it with a lighted match, to cause a sharp explosion and a blue flame at the far end of the tube. Still more pleased was he when, inverting a leathern pouch over the end of the reed, and so filling it with the gas, he was able to send it soaring up into the air.

“An inflammable gas, and one markedly lighter than the atmosphere. I should say beyond doubt that it contained a considerable proportion of free hydrogen. The resources of G. E. C. are not yet exhausted, my young friend. I may yet show you how a great mind moulds all Nature to its use.” He swelled with some secret purpose, but would say no more.

There was nothing which we could see upon the shore which seemed to me so wonderful as the great sheet of water before us. Our numbers and our noise had frightened all living creatures

away, and save for a few pterodactyls, which soared round high above our heads while they waited for the carrion, all was still around the camp. But it was different out upon the rose-tinted waters of the central lake. It boiled and heaved with strange life. Great slate-coloured backs and high serrated dorsal fins shot up with a fringe of silver, and then rolled down into the depths again. The sand-banks far out were spotted with uncouth crawling forms, huge turtles, strange saurians, and one great flat creature like a writhing, palpitating mat of black greasy leather, which flopped its way slowly to the lake. Here and there high serpent heads projected out of the water, cutting swiftly through it with a little collar of foam in front, and a long swirling wake behind, rising and falling in graceful, swan-like undulations as they went. It was not until one of these creatures wriggled on to a sand-bank within a few hundred yards of us, and exposed a barrel-shaped body and huge flippers behind the long serpent neck, that Challenger, and Summerlee, who had joined us, broke out into their duet of wonder and admiration.

“Plesiosaurus! A fresh-water plesiosaurus!” cried Summerlee. “That I should have lived to see such a sight! We are blessed, my dear Challenger, above all zoologists since the world began!”

It was not until the night had fallen, and the fires of our savage allies glowed red in the shadows, that our two men of science could be dragged away from the fascinations of that primeval lake. Even in the darkness as we lay upon the strand, we heard from time to time the snort and plunge of the huge creatures who lived therein.

At earliest dawn our camp was astir and an hour later we had started upon our memorable expedition. Often in my dreams have I thought that I might live to be a war correspondent. In what wildest one could I have conceived the nature of the campaign which it should be my lot to report! Here then is my first despatch from a field of battle:

Our numbers had been reinforced during the night by a fresh batch of natives from the caves, and we may have been four or five hundred strong when we made our advance. A fringe of scouts was thrown out in front, and behind them the whole force in a solid column made their way up the long slope of the bush country until we were near the edge of the forest. Here they spread out into a long straggling line of spearmen and bowmen. Roxton and Summerlee took their position upon the right flank, while Challenger and I were on the left. It was a host of the stone age that we were accompanying to battle—we with the last word of the gunsmith’s art from St. James’ Street and the Strand.

We had not long to wait for our enemy. A wild shrill clamour rose from the edge of the wood and suddenly a body of ape-men rushed out with clubs and stones, and made for the centre of the Indian line. It was a valiant move but a foolish one, for the great bandy-legged creatures were slow of foot, while their opponents were as active as cats. It was horrible to see the fierce brutes with foaming mouths and glaring eyes, rushing and grasping, but forever missing their elusive enemies, while arrow after arrow buried itself in their hides. One great fellow ran past me roaring with pain, with a dozen darts sticking from his chest and ribs. In mercy I put a bullet through his skull, and he fell sprawling among the aloes. But this was the only shot fired, for the attack had been on the centre of the line, and the Indians there had needed no help of ours in repulsing it. Of all the ape-men who had rushed out into the open, I do not think that one got back to cover.

But the matter was more deadly when we came among the trees. For an hour or more after we entered the wood, there was a desperate struggle in which for a time we hardly held our own. Springing out from among the scrub the ape-men with huge clubs broke in upon the Indians and often felled three or four of them before they could be speared. Their frightful blows shattered everything upon which they fell. One of them knocked Summerlee's rifle to matchwood and the next would have crushed his skull had an Indian not stabbed the beast to the heart. Other ape-men in the trees above us hurled down stones and logs of wood, occasionally dropping bodily on to our ranks and fighting furiously until they were felled. Once our allies broke under the pressure, and had it not been for the execution done by our rifles they would certainly have taken to their heels. But they were gallantly rallied by their old chief and came on with such a rush that the ape-men began in turn to give way. Summerlee was weaponless, but I was emptying my magazine as quick as I could fire, and on the further flank we heard the continuous cracking of our companion's rifles.

Then in a moment came the panic and the collapse. Screaming and howling, the great creatures rushed away in all directions through the brushwood, while our allies yelled in their savage delight, following swiftly after their flying enemies. All the feuds of countless generations, all the hatreds and cruelties of their narrow history, all the memories of ill-usage and persecution were to be purged that day. At last man was to be supreme and the man-beast to find forever his allotted place. Fly as they would the fugitives were too slow to escape from the active savages, and from every side in the tangled woods we heard the exultant yells, the twanging of bows, and the crash and thud as ape-men were brought down from their hiding-places in the trees.

I was following the others, when I found that Lord John and Challenger had come across to join us.

"It's over," said Lord John. "I think we can leave the tidying up to them. Perhaps the less we see of it the better we shall sleep."

Challenger's eyes were shining with the lust of slaughter.

"We have been privileged," he cried, strutting about like a gamecock, "to be present at one of the typical decisive battles of history—the battles which have determined the fate of the world. What, my friends, is the conquest of one nation by another? It is meaningless. Each produces the same result. But those fierce fights, when in the dawn of the ages the cave-dwellers held their own against the tiger folk, or the elephants first found that they had a master, those were the real conquests—the victories that count. By this strange turn of fate we have seen and helped to decide even such a contest. Now upon this plateau the future must ever be for man."

It needed a robust faith in the end to justify such tragic means. As we advanced together through the woods we found the ape-men lying thick, transfixed with spears or arrows. Here and there a little group of shattered Indians marked where one of the anthropoids had turned to bay, and sold his life dearly. Always in front of us we heard the yelling and roaring which showed the direction of the pursuit. The ape-men had been driven back to their city, they had made a last stand there, once again they had been broken, and now we were in time to see the final fearful scene of all. Some eighty or a hundred males, the last survivors, had been driven across that same little

clearing which led to the edge of the cliff, the scene of our own exploit two days before. As we arrived the Indians, a semicircle of spearmen, had closed in on them, and in a minute it was over, Thirty or forty died where they stood. The others, screaming and clawing, were thrust over the precipice, and went hurtling down, as their prisoners had of old, on to the sharp bamboos six hundred feet below. It was as Challenger had said, and the reign of man was assured forever in Maple White Land. The males were exterminated, Ape Town was destroyed, the females and young were driven away to live in bondage, and the long rivalry of untold centuries had reached its bloody end.

For us the victory brought much advantage. Once again we were able to visit our camp and get at our stores. Once more also we were able to communicate with Zambo, who had been terrified by the spectacle from afar of an avalanche of apes falling from the edge of the cliff.

“Come away, Massas, come away!” he cried, his eyes starting from his head. “The debbil get you sure if you stay up there.”

“It is the voice of sanity!” said Summerlee with conviction. “We have had adventures enough and they are neither suitable to our character or our position. I hold you to your word, Challenger. From now onwards you devote your energies to getting us out of this horrible country and back once more to civilization.”

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THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

Chapter XVIII: The Amphitheatre of Jet

For hours the black-haired folk had been streaming across the bridges, flowing along the promenade by scores and by hundreds, drifting down toward the gigantic seven-terraced temple whose interior I had never as yet seen, and from whose towering exterior, indeed, I had always been kept far enough away—unobtrusively, but none the less decisively—to prevent any real observation. The structure, I had estimated, nevertheless, could not reach less than a thousand feet above its silvery base, and the diameter of its circular foundation was about the same.

I wondered what was bringing the ladala into Lora, and where they were vanishing. All of them were flower-crowned with the luminous, lovely blooms—old and young, slender, mocking-eyed girls, dwarfed youths, mothers with their babes, gnomed oldsters—on they poured, silent for the most part and sullen—a sullenness that held acid bitterness even as their subtle, half-sinister, half-gay malice seemed tempered into little keen-edged flames, oddly, menacingly defiant.

There were many of the green-clad soldiers along the way, and the garrison of the only bridge span I could see had certainly been doubled.

Wondering still, I turned from my point of observation and made my way back to our pavilion, hoping that Larry, who had been with Yolara for the past two hours, had returned. Hardly had I reached it before Rador came hurrying up, in his manner a curious exultance mingled with what in anyone else I would have called a decided nervousness.

“Come!” he commanded before I could speak. “The Council has made decision—and Larree is awaiting you.”

“What has been decided?” I panted as we sped along the mosaic path that led to the house of Yolara. “And why is Larry awaiting me?”

And at his answer I felt my heart pause in its beat and through me race a wave of mingled panic and eagerness.

“The Shining One dances!” had answered the green dwarf. “And you are to worship!”

What was this dancing of the Shining One, of which so often he had spoken?

Whatever my forebodings, Larry evidently had none.

“Great stuff!” he cried, when we had met in the great antechamber now empty of the dwarfs. “Hope it will be worth seeing—have to be something damned good, though, to catch me, after what I’ve seen of shows at the front,” he added.

And remembering, with a little shock of apprehension, that he had no knowledge of the Dweller beyond my poor description of it—for there are no words actually to describe what that miracle

of interwoven glory and horror was—I wondered what Larry O’Keefe would say and do when he did behold it!

Rador began to show impatience.

“Come!” he urged. “There is much to be done—and the time grows short!”

He led us to a tiny fountain room in whose miniature pool the white waters were concentrated, pearl-like and opalescent in their circling rim.

“Bathe!” he commanded; and set the example by stripping himself and plunging within. Only a minute or two did the green dwarf allow us, and he checked us as we were about to don our clothing.

Then, to my intense embarrassment, without warning, two of the black-haired girls entered, bearing robes of a peculiar dull-blue hue. At our manifest discomfort Rador’s laughter roared out. He took the garments from the pair, motioned them to leave us, and, still laughing, threw one around me. Its texture was soft, but decidedly metallic—like some blue metal spun to the fineness of a spider’s thread. The garment buckled tightly at the throat, was girdled at the waist, and, below this cincture, fell to the floor, its folds being held together by a half-dozen looped cords; from the shoulders a hood resembling a monk’s cowl.

Rador cast this over my head; it completely covered my face, but was of so transparent a texture that I could see, though somewhat mistily, through it. Finally he handed us both a pair of long gloves of the same material and high stockings, the feet of which were gloved—five-toed.

And again his laughter rang out at our manifest surprise.

“The priestess of the Shining One does not altogether trust the Shining One’s Voice,” he said at last. “And these are to guard against any sudden—errors. And fear not, Goodwin,” he went on kindly. “Not for the Shining One itself would Yolara see harm come to Larree here—nor, because of him, to you. But I would not stake much on the great white one. And for him I am sorry, for him I do like well.”

“Is he to be with us?” asked Larry eagerly.

“He is to be where we go,” replied the dwarf soberly.

Grimly Larry reached down and drew from his uniform his automatic. He popped a fresh clip into the pocket fold of his girdle. The pistol he slung high up beneath his arm-pit.

The green dwarf looked at the weapon curiously. O’Keefe tapped it.

“This,” said Larry, “slays quicker than the Keth—I take it so no harm shall come to the blue-eyed one whose name is Olaf. If I should raise it—be you not in its way, Rador!” he added significantly.

The dwarf nodded again, his eyes sparkling. He thrust a hand out to both of us.

“A change comes,” he said. “What it is I know not, nor how it will fall. But this remember—Rador is more friend to you than you yet can know. And now let us go!” he ended abruptly.

He led us, not through the entrance, but into a sloping passage ending in a blind wall; touched a symbol graven there, and it opened, precisely as had the rosy barrier of the Moon Pool Chamber. And, just as there, but far smaller, was a passage end, a low curved wall facing a shaft not black as had been that abode of living darkness, but faintly luminescent. Rador leaned over the wall. The mechanism clicked and started; the door swung shut; the sides of the car slipped into place, and we swept swiftly down the passage; overhead the wind whistled. In a few moments the moving platform began to slow down. It stopped in a closed chamber no larger than itself.

Rador drew his poniard and struck twice upon the wall with its hilt. Immediately a panel moved away, revealing a space filled with faint, misty blue radiance. And at each side of the open portal stood four of the dwarfish men, grey-headed, old, clad in flowing garments of white, each pointing toward us a short silver rod.

Rador drew from his girdle a ring and held it out to the first dwarf. He examined it, handed it to the one beside him, and not until each had inspected the ring did they lower their curious weapons; containers of that terrific energy they called the Keth, I thought; and later was to know that I had been right.

We stepped out; the doors closed behind us. The place was weird enough. Its pave was a greenish-blue stone resembling lapis lazuli. On each side were high pedestals holding carved figures of the same material. There were perhaps a score of these, but in the mistiness I could not make out their outlines. A droning, rushing roar beat upon our ears; filled the whole cavern.

“I smell the sea,” said Larry suddenly.

The roaring became deep-toned, clamorous, and close in front of us a rift opened. Twenty feet in width, it cut the cavern floor and vanished into the blue mist on each side. The cleft was spanned by one solid slab of rock not more than two yards wide. It had neither railing nor other protection.

The four leading priests marched out upon it one by one, and we followed. In the middle of the span they knelt. Ten feet beneath us was a torrent of blue sea-water racing with prodigious speed between polished walls. It gave the impression of vast depth. It roared as it sped by, and far to the right was a low arch through which it disappeared. It was so swift that its surface shone like polished blue steel, and from it came the blessed, our worldly, familiar ocean breath that strengthened my soul amazingly and made me realize how earth-sick I was.

Whence came the stream, I marvelled, forgetting for the moment, as we passed on again, all else. Were we closer to the surface of earth than I had thought, or was this some mighty flood falling through an opening in sea floor, Heaven alone knew how many miles above us, losing itself in

deeper abysses beyond these? How near and how far this was from the truth I was to learn—and never did truth come to man in more dreadful guise!

The roaring fell away, the blue haze lessened. In front of us stretched a wide flight of steps, huge as those which had led us into the courtyard of Nan-Tauach through the ruined sea-gate. We scaled it; it narrowed; from above light poured through a still narrower opening. Side by side Larry and I passed out of it.

We had emerged upon an enormous platform of what seemed to be glistening ivory. It stretched before us for a hundred yards or more and then shelved gently into the white waters. Opposite—not a mile away—was that prodigious web of woven rainbows Rador had called the Veil of the Shining One. There it shone in all its unearthly grandeur, on each side of the Cyclopean pillars, as though a mountain should stretch up arms raising between them a fairy banner of auroral glories. Beneath it was the curved, scimitar sweep of the pier with its clustered, gleaming temples.

Before that brief, fascinated glance was done, there dropped upon my soul a sensation as of brooding weight intolerable; a spiritual oppression as though some vastness was falling, pressing, stifling me, I turned—and Larry caught me as I reeled.

“Steady! Steady, old man!” he whispered.

At first all that my staggering consciousness could realize was an immensity, an immeasurable uprearing that brought with it the same throat-gripping vertigo as comes from gazing downward from some great height—then a blur of white faces—intolerable shinings of hundreds upon thousands of eyes. Huge, incredibly huge, a colossal amphitheatre of jet, a stupendous semi-circle, held within its mighty arc the ivory platform on which I stood.

It reared itself almost perpendicularly hundreds of feet up into the sparkling heavens, and thrust down on each side its ebon bulwarks—like monstrous paws. Now, the giddiness from its sheer greatness passing, I saw that it was indeed an amphitheatre sloping slightly backward tier after tier, and that the white blur of faces against its blackness, the gleaming of countless eyes were those of myriads of the people who sat silent, flower-garlanded, their gaze focused upon the rainbow curtain and sweeping over me like a torrent—tangible, appalling!

Five hundred feet beyond, the smooth, high retaining wall of the amphitheatre raised itself—above it the first terrace of the seats, and above this, dividing the tiers for another half a thousand feet upward, set within them like a panel, was a dead-black surface in which shone faintly with a bluish radiance a gigantic disk; above it and around it a cluster of innumerable smaller ones.

On each side of me, bordering the platform, were scores of small pillared alcoves, a low wall stretching across their fronts; delicate, fretted grills shielding them, save where in each lattice an opening stared—it came to me that they were like those stalls in ancient Gothic cathedrals wherein for centuries had kneeled paladins and people of my own race on earth’s fair face. And within these alcoves were gathered, score upon score, the elfin beauties, the dwarfish men of the fair-haired folk. At my right, a few feet from the opening through which we had come, a

passageway led back between the fretted stalls. Half-way between us and the massive base of the amphitheatre a dais rose. Up the platform to it a wide ramp ascended; and on ramp and dais and along the centre of the gleaming platform down to where it kissed the white waters, a broad ribbon of the radiant flowers lay like a fairy carpet.

On one side of this dais, meshed in a silken web that hid no line or curve of her sweet body, white flesh gleaming through its folds, stood Yolara; and opposite her, crowned with a circlet of flashing blue stones, his mighty body stark bare, was Lugur!

O'Keefe drew a long breath; Rador touched my arm and, still dazed, I let myself be drawn into the aisle and through a corridor that ran behind the alcoves. At the back of one of these the green dwarf paused, opened a door, and motioned us within.

Entering, I found that we were exactly opposite where the ramp ran up to the dais—and that Yolara was not more than fifty feet away. She glanced at O'Keefe and smiled. Her eyes were ablaze with little dancing points of light; her body seemed to palpitate, the rounded delicate muscles beneath the translucent skin to run with joyful little eager waves!

Larry whistled softly.

“There's Marakinoff!” he said.

I looked where he pointed. Opposite us sat the Russian, clothed as we were, leaning forward, his eyes eager behind his glasses; but if he saw us he gave no sign.

“And there's Olaf!” said O'Keefe.

Beneath the carved stall in which sat the Russian was an aperture and within it was Huldricksson. Unprotected by pillars or by grills, opening clear upon the platform, near him stretched the trail of flowers up to the great dais which Lugur and Yolara the priestess guarded. He sat alone, and my heart went out to him.

O'Keefe's face softened.

“Bring him here,” he said to Rador.

The green dwarf was looking at the Norseman, too, a shade of pity upon his mocking face. He shook his head.

“Wait!” he said. “You can do nothing now—and it may be there will be no need to do anything,” he added; but I could feel that there was little of conviction in his words.

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