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Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 13, ISSUE 10
8TH JULY 2018

MR GAUNT

PART ONE
BY GREGORY
OWEN
"HE AIN'T
HUMAN..."

PLANETS FOR SALE

BY SHAINUR
ULLAH
A VISIT FROM
MOTHER
NATURE...

LIKE THE ANTS BY JW BAKER

JOHN C ADAMS REVIEWS JAMES HERBERT'S 'LAIR'

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 13, Issue 10

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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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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *Wormhole* by JohnsonMartin. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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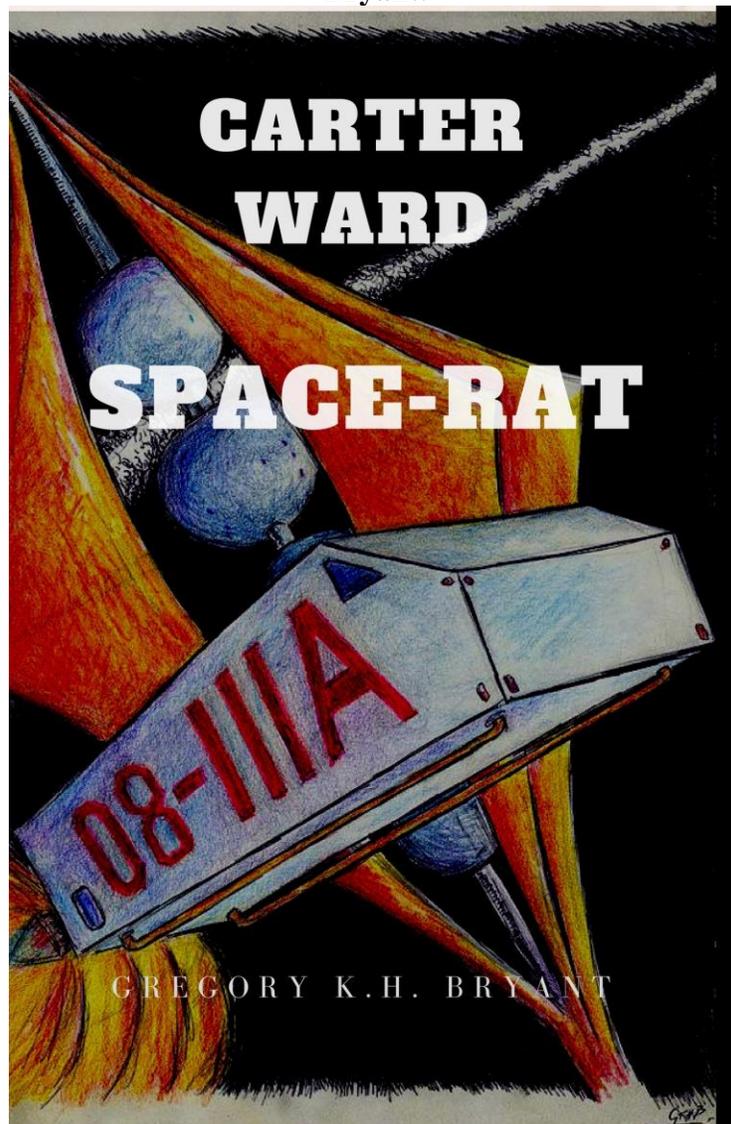
EDITORIAL

This week, in the first episode of another two-parter from Gregory Owen, a boy explains why he murdered the town mortician. A planetary estate agent tells us about the state of business. And the construction of an atmosphere piercing structure attracts unwelcome alien attention.

John C Adams reviews an old-school classic—they don't make 'em like that these days. Holmes and Watson confront the antediluvian god of the Atlantean beast-men in the final instalment of this jungle epic. Mud learns of Secretary Benson's evil plans for Astra Palace. On Mars, winter is coming. And down on Earth, a once great empire surrenders abjectly to the iron jackboot of invaders from the Continent: so begins a grim future of slavery.

—Gavin Chappell

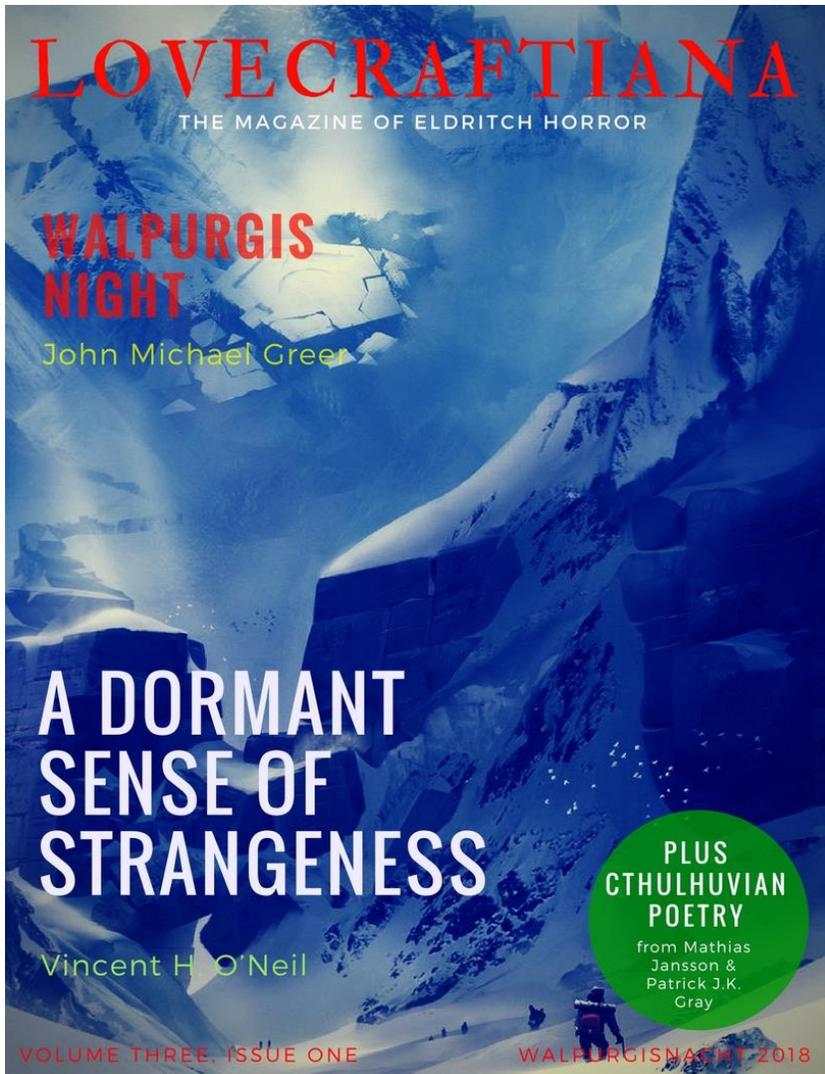
Now available from Schlock! Publications: [Carter Ward—Space Rat](#) by Gregory KH Bryant.



Available from Rogue Planet Press: the Spring 2018 edition of [Schlock Quarterly](#):



And the Walpurgisnacht edition of [Lovecraftiana—the Magazine of Eldritch Horror](#).



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MR GAUNT by Gregory Owen

Part One

The orange blaze of the Green Oaks Mortuary appeared nothing more than a tiny glowing ember in the distance as Hunter Dahl arrived at Liza Geller's residence just outside of town. He had started the fire an hour ago and breathed a sigh of thankful relief once he realized that the flames were not impeded by the heavy rain and had consumed the entire building, swallowing it down into the earth like a gaping mouth into Hell itself. He could have run home to his parents and likely be grounded for running around town in the middle of the night, but he chose instead to run two miles out of the way to tell his friend first. He didn't care how much his parents punished him for violating curfew; he didn't even care if the local police figured out that he was responsible for the inferno. Hunter just needed to let Liza know that she was finally safe now.

"I'm coming!" The frantic knocking at the front door forced Liza Geller to adopt a rushed decorum as she hurriedly tied her robe closed. She rarely had visitors at any time, seeing as how she was fairly new in town, but at almost one o'clock in the morning, she didn't expect anyone at all. "Who is it?" she grunted, stepping heavily with swollen feet while she made her way through the living room. She cupped a steady hand under her belly, now eight months along with her unborn child, and paused to take a breath. The baby's size was unusually large for its time in her womb, making everything a feat of difficult proportions—even walking was problematic. Answering the door would be a much more suitable job for the father if he was around, but Liza could make due. She was more than capable.

"It's Hunter!" a voice outside yelled.

"Who?" Liza stepped closer, unable to distinguish the words over the heavy rain dripping on her shingled rooftop.

"Hunter Dahl, Ms. Geller...please, let me in!"

Recognizing the voice's owner with an irritable sigh, she turned the deadbolt and reached for the doorknob, immediately wishing she had ignored the knocks and resumed her usual routine before bed. She also wished she had been able to make herself a bit more presentable, believing that she looked little better than a corpse in her present condition.

The door opened and in leaped the lean boy, thirteen years old, dressed in a chaotic mess of dark clothing. He brushed his wet, dirty blonde hair from his brow and revealed glassy eyes hidden amidst a narrow face caked with red mud—the same red mud that coated his shoes and was dripping onto Liza's floor in runny wads. Amidst the mud was a gleaming black liquid that almost resembled oil in the faint light. Her first thought was that the boy was tracking fresh mud, leaving tracks, all over her floor, but at the late hour, and seeing as how he seemed so disturbed, she let the thought pass.

"Thank you," he gasped, nearly doubling over from exhaustion. "Can I—I—"

“What’s going on, Hunter?” Liza asked, no longer irritated but now concerned about the boy’s demeanour. “What happened to you? What’s—” Hunter pushed past her delicately, unable to attain oxygen from the shallow breaths he took. “Have you been running this time of night, and out in the rain?”

Usually, Liza would be content to see Hunter—he was one of the only acquaintances she had made during her short time as a resident of Green Oaks. He seemed like such a nice boy, ever since the first day they met. When he saw her working and struggling in her front yard one afternoon during his walk home from school, he wound up planting roses in her garden while she rested. He insisted that she stay off her feet, and Liza immediately took a liking to the teenager despite repeatedly telling him that she wasn’t helpless. After that, Hunter was always coming by to talk to her and help with odd jobs around her house. Lately, though, he seemed troubled, but Liza understood and sympathized. Ever since his sister’s violent death a month prior, Hunter was different. Much different.

“Hunter, what’s going on?” Liza asked. “Do I need to call your mother? She must be worried...”

“N-no!” The teenager was still gasping, propping himself against the kitchen counter. He paused, mid-breath, and pointed to the faucet. Even when exhausted, he still found his manners.

“Water?”

He nodded, sending her a pleading look.

“Sure, you can have some. The drinking glasses are in that cabinet, there,” Liza said, pointing above the sink. “I’d offer you something else, but I’m a little low on supplies at the moment.”

Hunter quickly yanked the cabinet door open, plucked a glass from within, and slid it under the water spraying from the faucet. Before the glass was even half full, he put it to his lips and gulped deeply.

“Now tell me what’s wrong...”

Ignoring Ms. Geller, he was already pouring his second glass. Liza was growing impatient, so she walked over to him and grabbed his shoulder tightly, but in a friendly manner, to snap him back to reality. Hunter shivered at her touch and pulled away, nearly choking on the liquid as he swallowed in the process. “I... I-I’m sorry,” he finally uttered.

The concerned expression never left Liza’s face. She was still in a state of shock at Hunter’s abrupt arrival at such a strange hour, and yet it was always nice to see him. He was such a nice boy, so harmless and helpful, but something was obviously wrong. She would find out what it was. Her still-developing motherly instinct would help coerce it out of him, if need be. “It’s all right.”

“You look sick or something...you okay?” Hunter was deadly serious.

Taken aback momentarily by the remark, Liza almost laughed. “I’m fine. I was about to go to bed, dear. I hadn’t put on my skin cream...”

“You sure?” Hunter had thought of Liza as being pleasantly attractive, especially for an adult more than twice his age. Her face held a lighter complexion covered by a mop of long, raven tresses, but she looked different to him, as if she were becoming ill. Maybe the pregnancy was taking its toll. It was late, and he had barged in; he was amazed that she wasn’t panicking, but she never had to again.

“Yes—yes, Hunter, I’m sure. Okay?” she said, attempting to reassure him. “Now what’s going on?”

The teenager took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “I’m sorry, Ms. Geller. I...I had to...”

“It’s okay, really,” she interrupted warmly, calming herself in a bid to do the same to him, though she was still obviously befuddled by his entrance. She looked to his clothes, seeing the slimy mud and focusing on the other, unknown matter adhering to it. Black and reflective, like liquefied opal, it glimmered with an otherworldly twinkle, and Liza could ignore it no longer. “What do you have all over you, Hunter?”

Quizzically, he looked down to his feet to the mud that was dripping onto Ms. Geller’s clean floor. “Oh.” He took another drink of water. “Mud,” he said.

“No, dear...I know that’s mud. I mean the black stuff.” She reached out for him to point out to what she was referring, and he withdrew. “What is it?”

“Blood,” he answered with a cough. “It’s blood.”

“Blood? Human nor animal blood’s that dark, Hunter.”

“His blood is. And he ain’t human...may have been an animal...not sure...”

Liza’s eyes narrowed with confusion and quickly went wide with a realization. “His?” She moved forward toward the youth. “Hunter, what—”

His tone was drier than sun-bleached desert bones. “That’s what I came to tell you, Ms. Geller. You’re safe now. Everyone is. I killed him.” Liza could make out the barest hint of a smile on the boy’s face.

“Who?”

“Him, Ms. Geller. I killed him.”

“What are you talking about, Hunter? You’re not making any sense.” The subtlest fear managed to tinge her voice, and she wondered if this was reality. All of her senses were alight with sensations, all of them working perfectly—she believed that the baby felt them, too—but her

rationality ultimately betrayed her. It couldn't be real. It couldn't be true. Hunter was such a nice boy in this all-too horrible world...to commit a murder of anything besides a common housefly seemed unspeakable. And yet, he had been different since-

“Mr. Gaunt, Ms. Geller...”

Her rational nature now only provoked a nervous chuckle, and Liza Geller knew that what she was hearing was nothing more than farce. “Not this again,” she replied dismissively, realizing then exactly what he was speaking of. With his sister's murder, Hunter had begun spouting all of the same ridiculous prattle that plagued much of Green Oaks: the legend of the beast nicknamed “Mr. Gaunt.” It was little more than utter fiction, told around campfires and in a twisted nursery rhyme that she'd heard over her years, though infinitely more times during her time as a resident of the town.

“I mean it! It was him! The thing that killed my sister...”

The conviction in the youth's voice, along with the sheer amount of times she had heard about this creature, suggested to her that though this thing might or might not be real, most of Green Oaks seemed to believe in him. Belief, as Liza had learned in life, could be a dangerous weapon; dangerous for her, dangerous for a new life on the way, not initiated in the ways of the world.

However, this could all be attributed to the ramblings of a disturbed boy. After all, what proof was there? Had he really killed—murdered—anyone? The black substance on his clothes could not be blood of any kind, no matter what he said. “Hunter—”

“No,” he said adamantly, raising his voice in pitch, “I told you before! Mr. Gaunt...it was Mr. Craven, remember? I told you the day before yesterday!”

Liza nodded, trying her absolute best to appear as though she were following, allowing him to continue. He was right about the information he had given her, of course. He had come by two days previous, and even a lot before that in the preceding month, detailing his pursuit of the elusive Mr. Gaunt, the being that he blamed with his sister's death. How he reached that conclusion had been explained to Liza before by him, detailed step-by-step as though presented to her by a hot-blooded conspiracy theorist, and he was determined to end the spree that had, according to whispers around town, taken the lives of Green Oaks residents for a number of years. She disregarded it all, though, often changing the subject unsuccessfully because she knew Hunter to be harmless, even for a teenage boy, but her opinion was slowly changing. He had an overabundance of determination when he said two days before that he was going to kill Mr. Craven, and while concerned of the boy's state of mind, she thought nothing of it at the time, but now he was so certain, so sure of himself.

Hunter pulled out a chair from the nearby dining room table and sat. “It was him, and I killed him.”

“Mr. Craven? The mortician?” Liza reached for a chair herself and sat down slowly, looking at Hunter in disbelief. “You killed Mr. Craven?”

He shook his head and took another gulp of water, gazing at the floor. “No... he was already dead. I killed the thing in his skin.”

Sceptical and tired, Liza began to push herself up from her seat. “Okay, seriously Hunter... I know it’s been difficult for you recently, but this? You didn’t kill anyone, Mr. Gaunt’s not real, this is all—” She was interrupted by the loud clang of his drinking glass on the hardwood table.

“Look!” Hunter reached into his coat and slammed his hand down on the table, revealing a long hunk of charred bone covered in the same sticky, black residue that coated his hands, face, and much of his clothing. At the end was what appeared to be an incomplete hand, though nothing human by any stretch of the imagination: the fingers were elongated and clawed at the tips. “I killed the thing, can’t you see that? Mr. Gaunt was real, and I killed him!”

“What? You—” Liza coughed, visibly shaken by the boy’s words. “What is that?”

“His hand,” the youth stated coldly. “The bastard’s hand is all that’s left.”

She leaned back in her chair as her disbelief took hold. She felt her baby kick unconsciously, as though disturbed too by the revelation, and she rested her hand on her stomach to calm the unborn child. “You... you really killed him?” Liza chose not to even question the truth in his words. It couldn’t be negated or denied. Hunter had killed something. It just couldn’t be Mr. Craven...

“Yeah, I did,” he said definitively. “Look out the kitchen window. I set the mortuary on fire to make sure it’s dead. Used gasoline from my dad’s garage. You can probably still see it from here.”

Liza, with effort, raised up from her seat enough to see out. She always had a pretty clear view of the town, and it brought her a form of solace when she was busy washing dishes or making lunch for herself, but solace was the last emotion she was experiencing now. Though the running vein patterns of the rain water distorted anything she could possibly see in the darkness, she could make out a faint, twinkling light around where the Green Oaks Mortuary should be. Her heart sunk, and she followed suit back into her chair.

“Fire still going?” Hunter asked nonchalantly.

“Yes.”

Noticing that Liza had closed her eyes, he saw that he had upset her. She was in no condition to deal with things of this nature, not with her due date quickly approaching. “How’s the baby—?”

“Fine,” Liza replied firmly, not to be swayed. For a brief moment, she glared at the floor, appearing as though she were processing a traumatic event, something that she needed to deal with, and Hunter didn’t understand. He had saved her and everyone else in Green Oaks—she should be happy, or at least relieved, but she appeared horrified more than anything else. Hunter

had killed a monster, not a human being.

“Look, Ms. Geller, you should feel better...I saved you. My parents. Me. Everyone in town. I got the thing that killed Aubrey.”

“Tell me what happened.” Gone was her motherly exterior, and in its place was one of a police interrogator, or perhaps a psychiatrist in the presence of a sociopath. She needed to know. She had made the mistake of neglecting to listen to Hunter’s words, assuming them to be the ramblings of a grief-stricken young boy obsessed with a local legend when he should have accepted his sister’s death, and she wasn’t about to make that mistake a second time. She had long tried to convince him of the falsehood of his ideas, and now he was here, in her home, with blood on his hands. She would hear him out, and then decide what to do from there. “Tell me everything,” she said. And Hunter did, but it helped to delve into what circumstances had led to this moment.

Even in early childhood, Hunter Dahl had never been much of a believer in monsters. He had no fear of the bogeyman or the creature in his closet, or of the shadowy beasts that danced across his ceiling during the fiercest lightning storms. He had the advantage of a weak imagination, and it was never able to conquer his steadfast grounding in reality, making him quite mature for his age, even during the beginning of the tempestuous hell known as “The Teens.” He was a realist until the night something took his little sister, Aubrey.

Unlike Hunter, little Aubrey Dahl had spent much of her life in realms more fantastic than he ever could. She was a happy child due to it, but her creative faculties also made her nightmares and fears much more potent. She would constantly wake up in the middle of the night, crying for Mom and Dad and complaining of seeing and hearing creatures and other horrors skittering in the corners of the room, and they would reassure her that there was never anything there. Hunter would groan and roll his eyes when he’d hear her talk about the monsters she’d imagine, but it never seemed to faze him much. He loved his sister, surely, but her imagination only served to annoy him much of the time, but once she began asking him about the “tall, thin man,” something about that struck him as too odd to ignore.

One particular afternoon when he came home from school, he found the five-year-old drawing assorted pictures at the kitchen table. He curiously eyed the artwork, noticing that her scribbling was of a really thin figure with black eyes and pale skin, and a mouth of long, crooked teeth.

“What’s that?” he had asked.

“Misser Gone,” she called it through missing teeth. “The tall man ousside my window.”

“Misser Gone? That’s his name?”

“Mmhm,” she nodded, becoming all-too serious. “He watches me sometimes at night. He always smiles. He’s so scary.”

Next to the figure was a small, round-faced girl coloured purple with tears dripping from her eyes. Purple was Aubrey's favourite colour. The picture was crude, but disturbing all the same.

"I bet so," Hunter said. "How do you know about him?"

"Daddy told me who he was," she replied. "Have you ever seen him, Hunter?"

Hunter scoffed, but cleared his throat when he saw that she wasn't kidding in the least. In fact, her eyes glistened, appearing near tears. "Uh, no. No, I haven't. How often do you see him?"

"Been for a while...nearly every night."

Hunter wanted to quickly dismiss it at first like everything else, though he did wonder if maybe it could be some kind of Peeping Tom, and maybe Dad needed to know if he didn't already. "Oh."

"I don't want him to get me," she muttered. "Please don't let 'em get me. Misser Gone won't if my big brother protects me."

Hearing the sincerity of her statement, Hunter decided that he would be a nice sibling and not laugh at her. He had been a bit rough on her lately, and while he believed this was just another instance of her making up some new monster with her rampant imagination, he didn't want to push it. He didn't need Mom or Dad pissed off at him anyway for being a bully.

Hunter instead decided to ask his Dad what Aubrey meant by "Misser Gone," finding him in his tool shed outside tinkering on a broken down lawnmower, and his father chuckled as he wiped sweat from his brow. "Mr. Gaunt. She can't seem to say it right. You know, that old rhyme...you never seemed to buy into it. I'll talk to her, and I'll make sure no one's outside the next few nights...just in case."

"Right. You do that, Dad."

That was when Hunter was reminded of the poem. It was a strange nursery rhyme of sorts that he had heard since his days as a toddler, usually as a means to force him to only do good deeds, lest he get eaten by the beast. Kids chanted it while jump-roping and teenagers laughed about it, but there were some in Green Oaks who believed in it: Mr. Langston, who owned the Green Grocery on Salem Street was one of the believers. Every time Hunter would go in and buy a Coke during the summer, which was at least three times a week, old Mr. Langston would say, "Keep outta trouble, or Mr. Gaunt'll get ya!"

He believed that Green Oaks was probably a place where you didn't need to drink the water or else you'd believe in fairy tales. Every place had its boogeyman, though, he figured, but what was that rhyme? He tried to recall it:

*You must avoid Mr. Gaunt,
A vile, unearthly spawn—*

*For your dreams are where he'll haunt
Until the break of dawn.*

*Mr. Gaunt is tall and thin,
His flesh is pale and grey.
He'll gulp you down and wear your skin,
And walk into the day.*

*It matters not whom he eats,
So long's the meat's compiled.
But little tastes near as sweet
As a small, tender child.*

*He moves along from place to place,
Inspiring much distrust,
No one knows of his true face
Until they fall to dust.*

*He only sheds his guise at night,
His visage is a dreadful fright,
But when he stands out in the sun,
Mr. Gaunt could be anyone!*

Hunter shuddered as he remembered the words; it was definitely a morbid poem. Hunter wondered why parents told it to their kids, and why parents even let their kids repeat it. And just who was the author? It was no surprise at all Aubrey was so scared—any kid would be scared by this. But a kid with her imagination...she had to be terrified.

Two nights later, little Aubrey Dahl's fears were justified and Hunter began to believe in monsters. At around midnight on Wednesday, Hunter, who occupied a bedroom adjacent to Aubrey's near the southern end of their middle class home, awoke to the sounds of screams next door—his sister's room. He could make out the screams as hers and, at first, he wanted to shake his head and return to his dream of Melanie Hostadt from the front row of his English class, knowing it just had to be another of Aubrey's stupid nightmare like so many other nights. However, above her squealing, Hunter heard another sound: crashing, like the glass of her bedroom window being shattered and then a loud slam of splintering wood and metallic bending. Another squeal followed, but at the time, Hunter wasn't sure of its source.

As he listened, Hunter didn't realize then that he was frozen in shock, both from being awakened so abruptly and still lacking lucidity as well as the growing dread of what could be unfolding just beyond his bedroom's west wall. He only snapped out of his fear when he heard a guttural roar, but it belonged to no animal he'd ever heard. "Mr. Gaunt," he whispered to himself as the epiphany washed over him like icy water—could Aubrey have been right? Shit, what was he doing just sitting there?

Climbing out of bed frantically, Hunter heard a new sound: a ripping noise—tearing—like paper

being torn into strips. “Hunter!” he could hear Aubrey cry in terror. “Hunter, help me! Help meeeee!” After the third or fourth rip, his little sister’s pitched screams immediately ceased and there were slurping gulps, and something akin to gnawing. Crunching. During this, the thudding footsteps of his heavy-footed father were muted to Hunter, who could only hear those awful noises, like something was eating. “Aubrey!” Dad shouted, banging on her bedroom door. No reply, just a few more crunches and what Hunter believed to be two very large, swift footsteps, moving toward the outer wall where the window had been. “Door’s jammed shut!” By this point, Dad was trying to use his shoulder as a battering ram to break through, and Hunter, who had moved to his trembling mother’s side and stared at the door, could hear nothing beyond his father’s struggling.

It took only a few more hits before the door’s hold finally gave, and both of Hunter’s parents compensated for the absence of Aubrey’s cries by screaming in unison, her bed and much of the floor and walls stained with the splattering pulp of ripened cherry. Hunter could only stare in disbelief, and while his mouth was gaping open, no sound escaped his innards. He only truly gained his voice when he saw, among the pooling blood on the floor, what appeared to be footprints—long, twisted, and inhuman.

The Green Oaks police arrived along with the coroner, and Hunter recalled watching a young, heavysset officer immediately leave his sister’s room and run for the bathroom across the hall, throwing up whatever he’d eaten for dinner that night. The sound of it was a welcome distraction for Hunter, who’d grown weary of the screaming and weeping of Mom and Dad.

Very little of Aubrey was recovered, aside from a few discarded bones and bits of hair amid her shredded pyjamas—her favourite ones, decorated with little yellow ducks. The bedroom window was shattered and, in a fact that baffled the police, the door frame and the wood around the doorknob was splintered, jammed shut. Even the doorknob was warped in shape, squeezed and twisted by something with terrible strength. That had to be the bending metal noise that he heard earlier. But there was a sound after that—a squealing, or yelping, like an animal...one in pain. Had Aubrey fought back? Before her demise, had she struck a blow on the monster? Could that be why she was murdered so savagely?

While the lead officer (his name tag read Manfield) spoke to his father, taking his statement while his father droned softly and numbly, still coming to grips with what had happened, Hunter decided that he would look a bit closer at the crime scene while he was able. He knew that he couldn’t go in—Officer Manfield blocked the doorway and, if he wanted to keep his job, would never let Hunter inside to trounce over any evidence. He’d contaminate it, as they said on the T.V. crime shows that Mom watched.

Hunter wondered briefly if she would ever watch those again after this; she was sitting in the living room, just visible from the hallway, staring blankly at a photo of the family from last year’s Christmas party—Aubrey was wearing a little Rudolph sweater and had her hair in two pigtails with green and red bows. Hunter had so much pity for his mother now, but he had a task ahead of him. Looking past Officer Manfield, ignoring the blood covering nearly every inch of the room like a bad abstract painting, Hunter noticed something that caught his attention, something that stood out more than his little sister’s insides decorating what once a little girl’s

safe haven: little flecks of a black material scattered over the scuffed, warped brass of the doorknob. When Hunter interrupted the discussion between the two men, he asked Manfield what the material was.

“Hmm. Looks like ashes, maybe? Could be the perp had handled a burnt item or something. We’ll take a closer look.” Officer Manfield was obviously annoyed at the youth for butting in, taking away from his attempt to get through the call as quickly as possible, but he masked it by falsely smiling lopsidedly at him, nodding to his father as if to say he wasn’t finished with his questions, to just stay where he was. “I’m sorry about your sister, son. Do you have any idea who would’ve done this, uh—?”

“Hunter.”

“Hunter,” Manfield repeated.

“Mr. Gaunt,” Hunter whispered without thinking.

“That old nursery rhyme?” the officer asked, trying not to chuckle in disbelief out of respect for the horrible loss and for the bloody mess in the next room. Manfield didn’t need to do that sort of thing; his captain had already been on his ass for that kind of conduct at murder scenes before, but that old Mr. Gaunt crap was a laugh. If Harris weren’t in the john puking, he’d have a laugh at it all himself. “Nah, I don’t think so...look, I need to get the rest of your dad’s statement—”

The rest of Manfield’s counterpoint went unheard. Hunter knew what this boy in blue would never know. He remembered the fear in Aubrey’s eyes, how she acted that day she was drawing “Misser Gone.” He heard her screams not even an hour ago. He’d heard its roars. Stupid nursery rhyme or not, this thing was real—it had to be. It had eaten his little sister. Little tastes near as sweet as a small, tender child. Aubrey had been near forty pounds. He wanted to join the rookie, whom he could still hear in the bathroom, in making offerings to the porcelain god. Shit, why did I just sit there?

“Why don’t you try and get some sleep, Hunter?” He felt the clammy palm of his father on his shoulder. Hunter stared at Dad, then at Manfield, and realized that he had no way of arguing, nothing to barter. He looked back into his sister’s room, hoping to see her face, something that he never valued before. He wanted this to be a dream, that he did indeed return to sleep when he heard her screaming, and this was a nightmare influenced by another of her own. Just to see her smile and know she was alright...that was all he wanted. There was nothing beyond the blood and the chilly wind seeping in through the shattered window, though he could still feel her there.

Even when he tried to sleep that night, and for many nights after that, Hunter could still hear Aubrey’s screams. Her pleas for help, begging him, someone, to save her went unanswered, even in his dreams. It only took a week for Hunter Dahl to resolve to avenge his sister’s death. He would find and kill Mr. Gaunt; that was a fact. But first, he decided to do some research on the legend.

He felt it was a good idea to wait for the attention of the police to taper off. There was a funeral

service held, closed casket (since nothing was recovered) and attended by friends and family, Liza included, and a different officer that wasn't Manfield showed up for a follow-up a day later to check on the Dahl family. His parents were both numb to everything around them, even Hunter, but he understood. He felt the same, but that was how he meant to go about this situation: clinically and calculatingly.

The first step was to ask questions, beginning with where he spent most of his days. None of his friends or his teachers at school offered any information or help, however—only condolences for his loss. When he would discuss what happened to Aubrey to the few who asked, they were generally repulsed and empathetic, but when he'd then discuss Mr. Gaunt, most would laugh or simply change the subject—it was obvious to him that some believed in the myth, and believed enough to be frightened. The only one who would listen without obvious judgment was Liza Geller, and the single mother-to-be was obviously a realist, but she did humour him; likely due to Aubrey's loss, he figured. When the information spigot was obviously tapped out, he turned to the Internet.

Though Mr. Gaunt details were scarce, Hunter did discover a very disturbing trend that he had never paid attention to: the sheer amount of missing persons around Green Oaks over the last few decades, nearly twenty during his own lifetime. Since the early 1960s, over fifty known residents had vanished (some victims, others that maybe Mr. Gaunt masqueraded as), all of varying ages and backgrounds, though there was a significant fraction made up of children. Deciding that asking around wouldn't serve much to his cause, Hunter decided the next step was research at the local library.

Hunter spent nearly two weeks' worth of afternoons after school to researching anything he could find on Aubrey's killer (each day followed by his going to Liza's home to share what he had learned, and then home to watch the local nightly news for anything unusual), and he found that, again, he exhausted all sources pretty quickly. He did find some books on local legends and myths, and those proved to be the closest things to a vital oasis in a desert of no information, though every fact was vague and not very elaborate in detail. He even searched through that book on loan from some town called Dunwich Heights up north—something written by a "Mad Arab," according to the head librarian, Mrs. Naples, and while that sinister little volume held a great many writings of strange things that made Hunter's head spin, there was nothing about Aubrey's murderer that he could decipher. However, what he did find from the other books allowed him to form some theories as to what Mr. Gaunt could be.

One such theory was that Mr. Gaunt was once a man, but that he had somehow become something called a "Wendigo," a Native American myth that caused a person to become infected and altered by a malevolent spirit after consuming human flesh on sacred ground or something—the act had made him something much less than human himself. Perhaps he had been a Wendigo for so long that, in order to survive, he learned how to blend in with people, talking, acting, wearing their skin like a suit—kind of like camouflage for a hunter. Hunter would cringe at hearing or thinking of his own name being used in comparison to the creature.

Another was that he was some kind of demon that craved meat, and could look like anything or anyone to get it. It liked to hide inside of skin sometimes, perhaps. Or maybe he was some kind

of “skinwalker,” only he didn’t turn into animals like so many of the Native American myths claimed.

Though he felt his theories solid, Hunter felt that he didn’t necessarily need to know what Mr. Gaunt was—he only needed to know how to kill it. Books and the Internet had told him nothing, so he turned to other avenues. Movies told him silver would do the trick. Silver knives, silver bullets, silver melted down and fired from a slingshot. Fire, too. Everything was afraid of fire. Video games told him an infinite supply of ammo and rockets would annihilate the monster.

And yet, oftentimes during this crusade he had set upon, his mind continued drifting back to Aubrey’s bedroom doorknob and what Officer Manfield had said. Sure enough, it turned out he was right in his assumption: the coroner had determined the black substance to be ash. Ash from what, he couldn’t say, but Hunter had a theory among the many he had formulated. Mr. Gaunt, the real thing, could be allergic to or adverse to brass, what the doorknob was made out of, in some way. He recalled from a lesson on metals back in sixth grade science that brass was a composite of multiple metals, primarily copper and zinc, not just one like he had always thought beforehand. It was possible that the combination of metals was poisonous, or perhaps just one of them in the mix was responsible for the effect. He was unsure, and he felt he didn’t have time to try and probe further—after all, Aubrey’s bedroom doorknob had been taken as evidence and he felt time was running out before Mr. Gaunt killed again, if he hadn’t already.

Hunter resolved that he would take his own bedroom doorknob once he found the creature, carry it as a backup in case he couldn’t kill it with conventional means. Because he didn’t want to upset his parents, he stole only a few items from their home: an antique, double-barrelled .12 gauge and a box of shells from Dad’s gun cabinet and two of Mom’s silver steak knives, given to her by Grandma. He placed them in an old baseball equipment bag under his bed, ready for the time when he would confront Aubrey’s murderer. Thankfully, they never questioned him about the items; they were still preoccupied with grief.

Armed with potential weapons, Hunter took to enacting the final, and perhaps most crucial, portion of his plan: people watching in Green Oaks. In going with his theory of a creature hiding inside the flesh of a person, Hunter deduced that whoever housed the creature would likely be tall and slender. Sickly looking. Dead looking, or almost dead looking.

Skipping a day of school to conduct some legwork in his search determined that all of the research he had spent so much time on was far less useful than simple observation, and Hunter Dahl discovered a usual suspect among the populace of his small town within that one day, only three hours in, though he was unsure if it was a stroke of luck or fate. It was someone everyone knew and respected. Someone who was even there at Aubrey’s funeral, though Hunter hadn’t felt the click of recognition until that very moment.

Mr. Craven, the mortician.

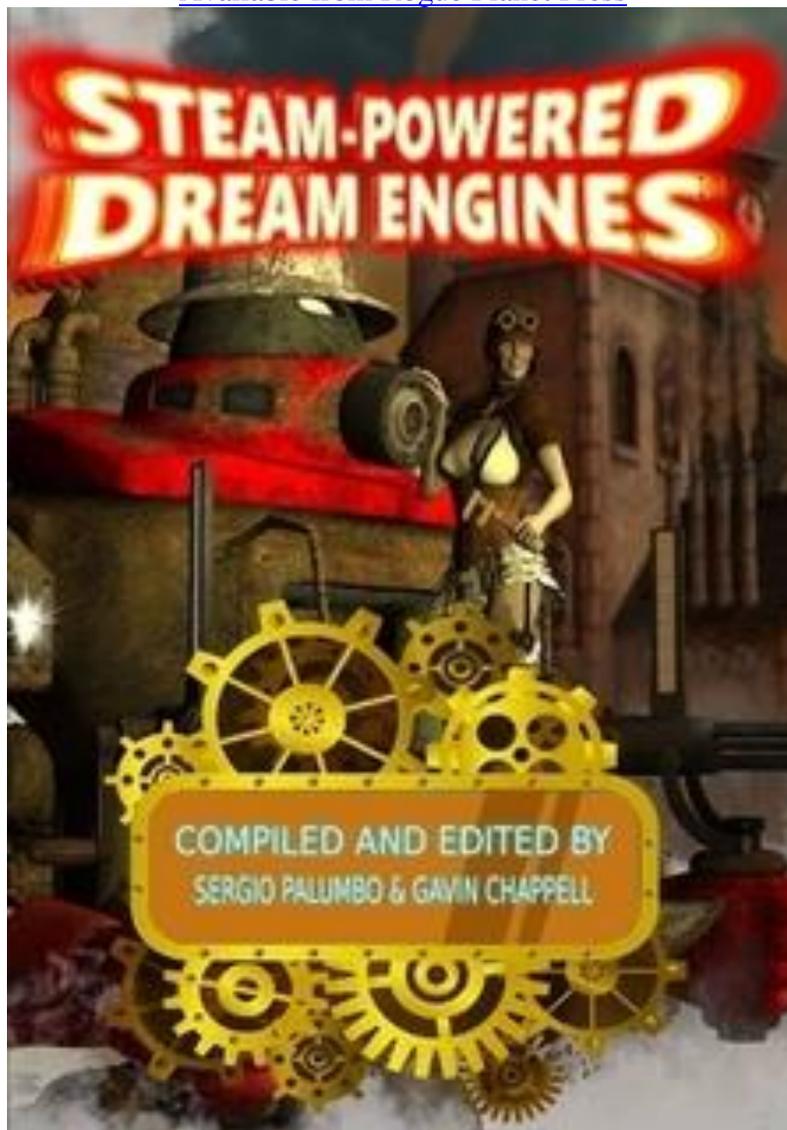
It had to be him...Not him. It. When Hunter looked upon him that day, carrying boxes from his grey Chrysler into the Green Oaks Mortuary, a petite, brick building with a front set of double doors and a back door for deliveries, surrounded by iron gates and fencing on all sides, he simply

knew. Mr. Craven was tall, almost 6'3" or 6'4", pale, and abnormally thin, as though he had been fasting for months. His black suits, which one would think had been tailored for him originally, were loose and baggy around his midsection and limbs, though short as though he'd had some sort of growth spurt recently. Despite his gangly appearance, he was a respected and well-liked member of the community, one people went to for comfort when they lost someone they loved. He was unmarried, kept to himself, even before Mr. Gaunt took his guise as Hunter assumed. Someone who works with the dead during the day was a perfect cover.

God, he even offered condolences for Aubrey's loss at her funeral...

CONCLUDES NEXT WEEK

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PLANETS FOR SALE by Shainur Ullah

The planetary real estate is in pretty good business now, and there are so many bodies up for sale. The universal economy seems to be in good shape for selling and buying worlds. It's the good balance of them selling for a pretty good price and people, species and other races all seem to have money for buying planets. It's a big business and only the richest in the universe can buy and sell off planets and they do it without care or any thought of the living beings living on the worlds they are buying or selling. Personally, I would love to buy a planet, but it does get complicated though because you've got to deal with the beings who are living on it.

You've got to follow the Universal Law—the procedure when buying and selling of worlds, and you've got to make sure that the living beings are have lived on the planet you are buying or selling have been taken into account. There's a population problem in the universe, and so many of these heavenly bodies are over populated. So worlds with vast amounts of space are in need and it's this need which makes the planet real estate business booming right now. Planets that weren't worth much back in the day have now tripled in price. Of course, the world has got to be good at supporting life, but some people are literally just buying planets without any care because they hope to sell it off for a good price.

Some rent out worlds to other races to live in, and that's a very tricky business because if anyone cannot pay the rent they're simply kicked off the planet. I'm a concierge and work for a company which has bought a large amount of space which has ten planets all orbiting a sun. As a concierge, I pull double duty as a receptionist and dealing with problems a certain being or race may have with their stay. I've done planet viewings to new beings who are interested coming to stay at one of our planets on a monthly rent basis. The concierges monitor all ten planets orbiting the sun from a spaceship and there are also three moons shared between the ten planets. Any problems we find we call the correct people to fix it.

There are some dodgy people within the planet estate business. You get some who buy planets and literally kill every being living on that world. One of the tragedies of the cosmos—forgotten by history, I sometimes think. You see when you buy a planet, the race living on it must be notified and given a new M class world to live in. You as the buyer must now look after them and they become your sole responsibility. If you cannot ensure that you can look after the race belonging to a world you have bought, then you cannot buy it. Then life in the large universe always has its corrupt individuals, and there are those who buy planets illegally and enslave the race down below, but the Universal Law has eyes on everyone.

Now owning a planet, you've got to work with Mother Nature. Now that's a tricky one because all planets have some kind of nature at work. You've got to buy a bond sufficient to ensure that the planet you own has a good balance of life and death. Otherwise Mother Nature would have to intervene. Having too many multiple races in one world can cause problems like wars, de-evolution for a race, unbalanced population, and starvation. Top brass in my company have been stuffing all ten planets with so many races that its getting out of control. I guess all those suits care about is the money coming into their accounts every month.

The life and death balance on all ten of our worlds have become so tenuous that the suffering has

increased, and Mother Nature will have to intervene. We, the concierges, will have to get off our comfy lives within the spaceship and go down to the worlds and under the command of Nature. We help one race defeat other races in war or other conflicts to help evolution go the way interstellar regulators deem best. I don't know how "Mother Nature" works out which race overcomes another, or which race must die out and I guess that's her problem but all that we the concierges must do is give weapons and medicine to recognized leaders of a few races while the other races must suffer. I mean, on all ten of our planets, there is war going on, and it's so hard trying to sell the worlds to future races or people trying to buy them or rent them or even live within them.

A couple of weeks ago, I had the king of Yuara, fourth from its own sun, hoping to lace some of his people in one of our planets on a rental basis. But when I was showing him our properties from orbit, he wasn't too chuffed to see the amount of trouble that was already going on inside all of properties. I even tried to tell him that my company also looks after other planets on a monthly payment basis. So if he needed us to organise or police his planet we could even do that—for a fee. He denied my offer as he didn't think my company could look after a planet when all ten of ours were in disarray!

So, my company now has the visit of Mother Nature, and she is a vicious woman! When a company that owns real estate gets a visit from her, that's not a good sign. There are specialists—mercs, I call them—who come down to the planet with us, usually incognito. The concierges were ordered to give advanced weapons to one of the races on one of our ten planets which are otherwise illegal in the universe unless special permission was given to use them. There were five of us who went down to one of our worlds. As we started handing out these advanced weapons, a man unknown to me began showing how to use them and giving the natives "medicine" to make them stronger.

Within a month, the race which we'd given advanced weapons to had gone on a bloody crusade and had become the dominant species on that planet. It was a horrible sight, and day and night, the concierges got phone calls, emails, and other forms of messaging from leaders whose people were being wiped out—asking for our help. All we could tell them "it's on the order of Mother Nature," and the new dominant species were now ruling the other races or what was left of them on the planet they were living in.

We toured the other nine planets, giving only one of the species on the orders of Mother Nature advanced weapons and "medicine," and they too became the dominant species of those planets. The other races merely became the minorities, immigrants, outliers, and outcasts. I will be honest. It did control my company's business and made it more organized, and therefore you should never stuff a planet you own with too many competing races.

As time progressed, it did become easier to view off these planets to future buyers or renters and even allow dominant species to create their own laws. The trickle of complaints grew into a deluge of desperate pleas from dying races on each of our ten planets. It's horrible but, being a concierge, I must do my job. Each of the dominant species on each world made a peace treaty with the others.

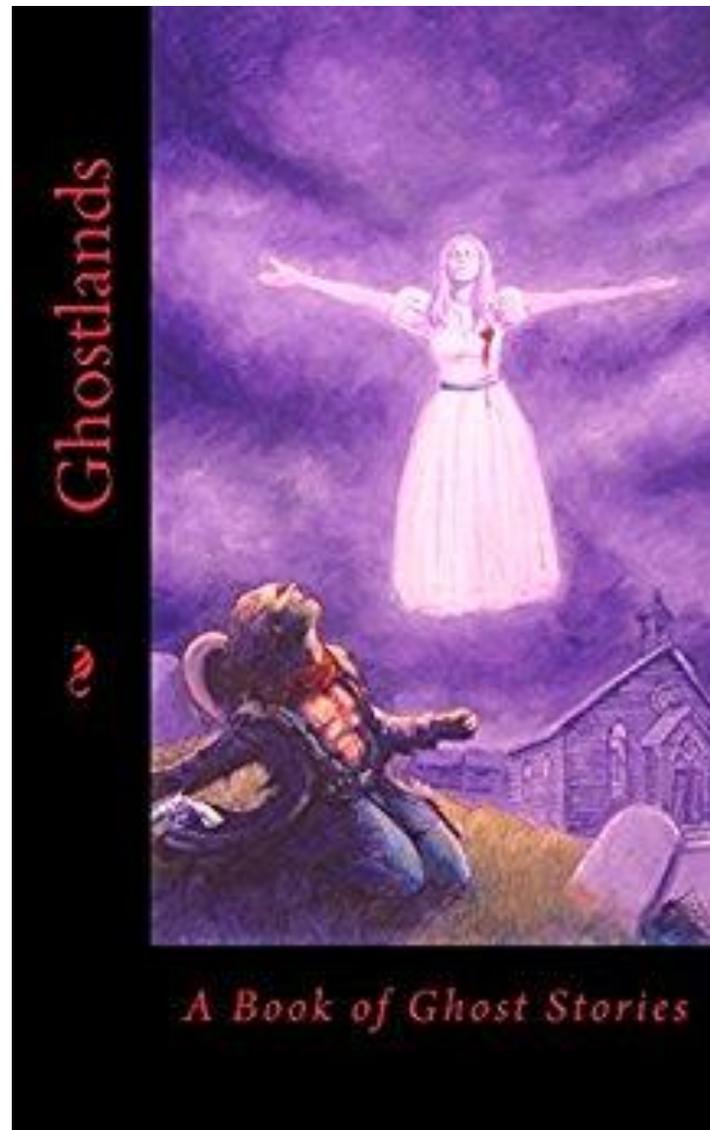
One day, I started to feel sympathy for the races that had dwindled in numbers because Nature had singled them out for second class status. I decided to give each of the minority races on each of the ten a planet just one of the advanced weapons, granting them ray of hope and a fighting chance for survival—or a bit of revenge for what had happened to them.

I mean, I never thought it would completely break the balance but when I awoke the very next day, it became the worst day of my life. Some of the minority races whom I 'd given only one advanced weapon had somehow managed to intelligently make more of them. Driven by bloodlust, they'd made them more powerful and devastating. The dominant races on each world weren't dominant anymore, and the bloodshed was immense. Growing even worse than before, and even the planets themselves were at stake of being destroyed. The new dominant species who'd once been minorities were now waging wars on our other planets through Roman peace!

In two days, much of the life on each planet were destroyed, and every race killed. The bright, vibrant, green ecology had simply and silently withdrawn. Right now, I am just waiting for my punishment from my managers and Mother Nature for what I'd done of my own accord. I'd probably lose my Interstellar License and never be able to work as a concierge or selling or renting out planets.

THE END

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LIKE THE ANTS by JW Baker

I arrived on Earth whilst it was raining, heavy sheet of water thundering from a black sky, filling up the gutters and making new rivers and watercourses out of the litter and detritus in the street. I'd only read about rain, the water cycle, the oceans and on some planets how they don't have to dig for their water. Seeing it for real it was almost terrifying. I battled the urge to 'ooh and aah' as I was sharing a Maglev cabin with Taela and didn't want to come across as some backward yokel who was amazed at everything he saw. She pointed out all the sites as we whooshed by, though we were traveling so fast I could hardly see any of them, for a while we travelled parallel to the infamous 'Great Wall', I didn't find it particularly great, Taela said it was supposed to be bigger but Tibetan rebels had dismantled a lot of it. The first Martian Launching area at Beihang was what really interested me, it still had the nose cone of the first Martian rocket on a pedestal. The city was unbelievably big, even going on Maglev it took nearly two minutes to get to the centre, neon signs and holographic adverts becoming psychedelic blurs, traffic passing so quickly that the blur of the headlights looked like streams of electric pulsing continuously along the gridded roads. I grew up on a Project where everyone knew everyone, so the city seemed like some giant inconceivable behemoth, constantly disgorging people and sensations. My home was the largest back on Lalande, three whole floors, towering over everything, here every building seemed to pierce the cloud layer. I felt like Gulliver in Brobdingnag or a midget from one of those internet videos. Though the strange protuberance in the centre of the city was the taller than all of them. The 'Needle' or so it was called was what had brought me here and there was no missing that, no matter how fast you were traveling or how bored you were feeling. It lived up to its name, seeming little more than a narrow shaft of light shooting up from the city, like a neat crease within reality.

"Gonna get bigger soon."

Taela reminded me, from within the pages of her magazine (genuine paper—very stylish).

"Workers are building on it all the time."

I was tempted to remark upon how phallic it looked but decided not to.

"Makes me and my water filter feel a bit tiny, literally.."

I grinned, though I was quite jealous of whom ever got to design it, probably some billionaire brat with links to the Party or an incredibly under-endowed UN bureaucrat looking to stamp himself in the history books.

"Having just come back from the colonies I can say we need water filters more than needles."

She folded away her magazine as we glided to a stop, maglev wasn't like space travel there was no clumsy bone jarring jolt, you smoothed to your stop with grace and ease.

"I guess you're no fan of the Needle's designer," I presumed, taking my satchel out of the luggage compartment. She smiled. Thankfully unlike a lot of Earth women she hadn't gone with

the strange fashion of ‘teeth tattoos’ which turned their smiles into twisted colours and images, hers was clean, refreshing and business-like (though probably the work of artificial stainer and plaque eating nematodes).

“I spend little time on terra firma for the exact reason the Needle has been built.”

We climbed out of the train, through the airlock set into the Maglev tube and out onto the station, another fifty storeys marvel of glass, burnished concrete and retro-grown oak.

“And what is that?” I asked, I liked the way she spoke, not like most California reared Earth girls; ‘oh my gawd, that’s like so hot’, but with elegance and adroitness.

“Arrogance, Mr Tzu, arrogance.”

She lead me past the automated ticket desks and into the main concourse, people on Earth have an obsession with shopping, shops everywhere, clothes, technology, watches, Insta-tattoos, here was no exception. Everything was trying to sell you something genuine Armani phones, Siers palmtops, coffee grown on Leonis. The crowds and noise and heat were stifling, I really felt that all fifty billion inhabitants were pressing up against me, stinking of perfume, body odour and fried food.

‘Arrogance?’ I had to shout to make myself heard, nearly losing her in the thick clot of human beings. She grabbed my hand and dragged me along, like a reluctant kid on the way to the dentists.

“The Colonies are living in mud huts and on UN aid.”

We eventually reached the exit, a couple of Party officials in fancy uniforms were standing guard, mostly for show I imagined. They liked to make it clear to visitors exactly who was in charge.

“Earth just keeps getting richer and richer—”

“We don’t all live in mud huts.”

I felt the need to interrupt, for all her lovely charms she had a typical political attitude, looks can be deceiving can’t they?

“Oh.”

She looked genuinely shocked.

“I didn’t mean, I know you’re from...”

She blushed. Her face was like some elaborate glass ornament light from within. We were sort of just standing on the stations steps and I suggested we take a taxi up to the apartments. We rode in

silence across the massive city, as we did so it only began to rain harder.

“Mishta’ Tushoo. Ish gud to shee yoo,” lisped Chairman Gawk, encapsulating my hand within his pudgy paw. “I trusht the jorney wushant too stweshful?”

It was unusual for the company director to meet with a lowly engineer, especially one from some colonial backwater, where (it seemed a universal presumption) they lived in mud huts and ate dirt. Perhaps it was a PR thing or more likely as I entered the chairmen’s office, he was just a little eccentric. I took a seat behind his desk, for the director of a trillion euro, interstellar conglomerate his office was positively Spartan. Most of the room was taken up by a wraparound window, looking down a full three hundred floors to the street below, whilst the wall behind me was one massive photograph of Earth taken from low orbit, its cities golden filigrees of light and the space elevators a spikey skirt around its middle. I’d seen pictures of Lalande from orbit; it looked mostly blue with some brown splodges in it.

“Good of yoo to take shutch intawesht in our little pwoject,” the chairmen continued, plonking himself down on an executive recliner, went the office had been constructed in the dim and distant days of the twenty first century it had rivalled the height of the Burj Khalifa and the first chairmen had been able to look down on all from his lofty perch but that had been centuries ago. Now all the buildings grew taller, dwarfing the tower and giving him a view no more impressive than the bedrooms of some executive apartments directly opposite. It must have made Mr Gawk feel incredibly small, I supposed.

“It’s a wonderful idea of yours, this needle.”

I lied, I had already concluded the needle was a giant, wasteful eye soar.

“Thank yoo. The opinion of a man of your talents matters gwately,” the chairman simpered, taking out a cigar (surely the ultimate status symbol in a society where hardly anyone smoked and tobacco had to be grown to order) from a drawer in his desk, lighting it with a bejewelled, gold plated lighter. I was just getting used to how rich Earth people really were, on Secundus, my University, everyone was either a student or a professor and lived in that special bubble where economics doesn’t really touch academia. Besides it being a Hab meant no one wanted to pay extra weight taxes on large ostentatious possessions.

“Though of course our little pwoject wasn’t my idea.”

He smiled and puffed on the cigar. I noticed he had teeth tattoos of the company symbol, a curiously feminine modification.

“So... who thought up this...” I struggled for the word. Ugly? Wasteful? Pointless? “...ingenious monument?”

The chairmen laughed, his porcine body rocking in its luxury silk suit. This laughter prompted a

strong inhalation of cigar smoke and it was a full minute of coughing and spluttering before he could fully answer.

“Why, everyone is reshponsible for the Needle’s cweation.”

He had become quite red faced from the coughing and beads of perspiration burst from his round, fat face. I don’t like oddly ‘aren’t we all a big happy community’ answers like that, no doubt he’d practised it for when he was interviewed by journalists and bloggers.

“But who came up with it?”

I felt like probing a bit more.

“Who originally designed it, what team? What research division?”

He extinguished his cigar and dialled up two glasses of vintage bourbon from the desks autobar.

“Nobody, me and a doshzen of the other big companies are all working on it. It’s weached the upper atmosph’phere now.”

He seemed pleased with this achievement and drained both glasses of scotch. The rest of the meeting was a lot clearer; he asked that I oversee the superterranean struts that held the Needles base in place. I got up to leave when I noticed what was on a glass case on the corner of his desk, a fibrous grey-green mushroom, bushy with mould, the only organic thing in the room.

“Ah! Yoo’re looking at my faworite speshimen.” He giggled in delight and held the glass box closer to me, popping open the roof of the case.

“It’s fwom the fwontier worlds,” he explained with an almost unhealthy amount of enthusiasm. “Ewidani, I think, all the executives have one, they produce a wonderful, natuwaly occawing ethanol.”

He plunged his hand into the case and gave the fungus a squeeze, some thick, juicy liquid oozed out from between his sausage fingers.

“Mixed with the juices of the fungi, it’s quite an intawestin’ little dwink, though—”

He leaned in and gave me a conspiratorial wink.

“—Just for us who can affawd it, eh?”

I am ashamed to say I felt glad to be included as one of the ones who could ‘affawd’ his (presumably) disgusting fungi-alcohol.

“The fungush pwoduces cellulase, an enzyme which makes certain sugaws into alcohol.”

Chairmen Gawk had originally trained as a bio-chemist, or so Taela had told me, the company he owned help sell the stem cell treatments and gene therapies that had begun to make hospitalization unnecessary agreed it was quite interesting and he promised to send me up a couple of bottles. The rain hadn't let up in the week I'd been there.

When people say 'life on Earth is tough' they don't exactly mean that. Life on Earth is easy, it's the people that are tough. The work wasn't like college. I was given a small team, architects mostly, soft skinned and swathed in designer silks and perfumes. I could delegate to them and spend the rest of the day exploring. It would be unfair to denounce the city—I think it had grown a bit too big to have a name—a faceless, inorganic concrete jungle. There were growths and clutches of nature, you just had to know where to look. Not much originating from Earth, though; you'd have to go way outside the city for that, most of the parks and woodland which I explored were imported from places like Leonis, Gliese and Eridani. Leaves like peacock feathers, twisting vines and creepers that seemed to grow as you watched them, flora from a thousand worlds. I contracted some sort of flu virus a couple of weeks into the project, but the auto-bar was able to give me some injections so I was only sick for a couple of days. I began to meet with Taela more regularly. She was a sort of senior engineer, charged quite improbably with filling the Needle with fiberoptic cable. Like a lot of Earth people she tended to drink and drug a bit more than I was comfortable with but I didn't mind, it was just good to be able to spend time with her. Yet still, like Gawk she was elusive about who first came up with the idea of the Needle.

"No idea is just a collection of people," I affirmed as we had dinner in one of the spinning restaurant bars in the corporate district.

"Good ideas are collaborative."

She picked at her fish curry and sipped some of that disgusting mushroom-alcohol which Gawk had talked about.

"Yeah, but why built something like that?" I countered. She was never excitable like I was, always calm, always coy, I liked that. "It's taller than any of the space elevators now."

She smiled that wearisome little smile again and proffered me some of the mushroom alcohol. I took a sip. It wasn't unpleasant, one of those types of spirit that you seem to be able to taste with your eyes. They had even started to ferment the mushrooms into beer, though I made a point of drinking fancy Luna grown red wine.

"The Needle has pierced the skin of the atmosphere." She finished off the strange concoction when I handed it back to her.

"Very prosaic, but what is it for?"

"It doesn't have to be for anything."

That annoyed me greatly. I believe there is nothing worse than a building or object without purpose. She took out her tablet and flicked through some designs, the reinforcements at the base were now nearly two miles deep and special carbon fibre cable had been brought in to tether the great monstrosity to the grown, lest it topple itself over.

“It has to be for some reason other than exceptional size.”

She looked bored and browsed some more design ideas.

“Don’t bore me, Tzu. Now, more of that mushroom stuff, I think.”

I sighed. This wasn’t a place where questions were welcomed. I wouldn’t call them closed minded, it was just that they couldn’t be bothered to find answers.

“What about all the fibre optics? Surely they must have a purp—”

She silenced me with a wave of her hand.

“I’m taking you to a bar,” she stated, laying what I thought was meant to be a comforting hand on my wrist. “I’m determined to have you enjoy yourself.”

In a world of designer skyscrapers, partitioned into office blocks presided over by bureaucrats perhaps the random construction of a gigantic needle isn’t so odd after all. Here originality and ingenuity were words only used in management training videos. The original creative that designed the needle, if indeed there was one, was probably buried under mounds of paperwork and committee meetings. Finding the origin of an idea is hard with anything that is created, but designing things for a living I think I still have that naive idea that the genesis of the idea is sort of sacred. It doesn’t feel right to me. The concept that everyone just sort of decided to build something, that would make me obsolete if the idea just sort of happened by. There needs to be a Da Vinci, a Brunel, a Ford; otherwise we don’t have any will power, we can’t debate or think. I tried to explain this to Taela at a bar, she laughed and picked me to dance with me, giving me some brown powder in a ceramic pipe to snort.

“You need to relax, just chill for a bit,” she assured me, snorting the powder from the pipe with an ungainly schnurking sound. “You’re all business.”

“I like business.”

She sighed theatrically and pressed herself against me. That’s all I really remember from that night.

I was nursing a terrible hangover when news of the ships came. I had been advised to take a pill from the autodoc, but I knew if I did that I'd be cured and would no longer have an excuse not to do any work. I was enjoying breakfast in bed when the newscast pinged itself on. Ships, actual ships had been discovered traveling quite fast toward Earth by scanners around the orbit of Pluto. They were currently somewhere between us and Proxima, closing fast. This may seem like miraculous news but the Sagan Foundation were always picking up these little traces of this and that, too often 'alien craft' were unregistered colonial vessels or bugs in the system. I dismissed the news and went back to my breakfast.

I met Taela sometime later at the base of the Needle. It still amazed me that in a city like this such a space could be cleared, a full three miles of flat, featureless concrete apron, with the needle rising up from its centre. It was impressive close up, a little thicker than my arm and made of mirror polished steel, its convex surface distorting the body into fun house shapes when you got really close. There were a couple of technicians (I think I'd met them; it was hard to remember) were at the very base holding some sort of listening device up to the needle, like a doctor listening to a pregnant mother's heartbeat.

"Yup," the technician surmised as I approached them. "Definitely got a few snapped cables." He removed the device and nodded at his colleague whom scribbled some notes on a tablet. "Can hear 'em snapping every few seconds."

They didn't trouble themselves to notice me.

"The fibreoptics?" I asked, feeling horrible vertigo as I looked directly up, it disappeared into a wire thin point, piercing a layer of white fluffy cloud and disappearing.

"Gonna need to replace 'em," the technician confirmed, lighting a cigarette. I thought that the Needle looked a lot like a piece of modern art.

"Still think it's an eyesore?" a familiar voice asked behind me, it was Taela, she'd pulled up in one of those electric go-kart type cars they were suddenly so fond of. It was laminate fibre plastic, sprayed a gaudy pink. She looked as though she had just carjacked a toddler.

"I think it's better up close."

She swept out of the car with a dramatic rustle of her dress—it's quite hard to make a dress rustle dramatic.

"I guess you've heard about the ships?"

The technicians smiled at her but she ignored them.

"Yeah. I doubt it'll be anything."

She giggled and swept me up into the passenger seat before I knew what was happening. The technicians certainly looked jealous. We sped away, leaving them to scowl and gossip.

“You’re a cynic. It can’t always be space junk or unregistered ships.”

“You genuinely believe in aliens.” I didn’t want to scoff but I considered myself pretty scientific and nearly four centuries of scanning the heavens had revealed precisely bugger all. “Going to join a saucer cult I suppose,” I replied dryly.

She swerved the car to the edge of the concrete apron and punched my arm flirtingly. We arrived at one of the 3D printed buildings on the outskirts of the concrete. Squatters from the slums outside the city sometimes shacked up there when the staff had gone home. Gawk either allowed them and sent food packages or had them beaten by security, depending on his mood. The elevator down to the support struts was housed within and I dimly wondered if we’d find some hobo passed out within.

“We aren’t allowed here—” I began, then felt a sudden hot flush of anger. It was like being back at school. “Exactly why aren’t we allowed here?”

She just giggled and leapt out of the car, taking out a card that hung on a lanyard around her neck. After a brief flash to one of the elevators, the doors were open, she swept me into the compartment.

“I think the guy who designed all o’ this should be allowed to see it.”

The elevator was a vac tube, like the one that exploded in on itself on Titan, and as we descended beneath the bowls of the city I couldn’t help but imagine what would happen should the skin of the tube puncture. I am not claustrophobic but the image of us all being sucked out into a wall of compacted dirt rather spoiled the intimate trip with a beautiful woman.

“I don’t feel like I’m entirely in control.”

Taela popped a couple of god-only-knows-whats from a dispenser and laughed.

“I know, it’s great.”

“Not that, I mean I’ve been here for weeks designing something that apparently just sprang up and...”

“...and?”

She proffered a pill but I declined. I didn’t want to sound stupid. The elevator swooshed to a halt and we climbed out down a concrete tunnel. As far as the city extends upward, it is nothing to its subterranean self, miles of cables, conduits, sewers, computer substrate, blast shelters, boltholes; not all of it meant for people, mostly for electronics. I would love to see what it would look like when sliced in half like a cake; a lattice work of engineering, a hundred different technologies

layered up upon one another. We came to a steel door. I was expecting to find desiccated bodies, a munitions factory, some evil mechanism powered by a forsaken child, or something impressive. Instead, when the door irised open we found an empty room. From the centre of the roof a burst of shimmering albino hair fell down, billowing out to form the very fabric of the walls. Fibreoptics up close are beautiful to, though I had expected to uncover some villainous conspiracy or some such.

“Beautiful, don’t you think?”

She took my hand and we walked into the cavernous chamber, I expected there to be an echo but there was none, making our actions seem oddly cut off.

“This is all collecting power—” I started to say but she cut me off and we were content with walking across the strange landscape. The tiles of the floor were matte black sheets of carbon, the fibre optics trailing down the ceiling and inside them. We were walking within a giant battery. She shoved me against the wall. She smelt of wine, spirits and sterilising hand soap.

“Is this the only reason you brought me here?”

She stroked my face playfully. The fibre optics felt bristly against my back.

“You need to relax.”

She said that a lot. She was close and I could count the minute imperfections on her face, the ones that are normally airbrushed off Earth people.

“Anyway, I thought you should see what we’re working toward.”

She leant into kiss me. The door burst open and a technician appeared.

“Miss Taela, Mr...er Tzu, there’s fantastic news.”

The ‘ships’ were real. They had lost the inverted commas, they were genuine alien ships. To say that was dancing in the street would be almost accurate, people left their offices, factories homes, just to gather in the squares and plazas to listen to the announcement officially on the public jumbo screens. The information had been leaked an hour before and it had gone viral within a few minutes but still people gathered together, wanting to bask in the glow of a world which was totally new again.

“...A momentous day for humanity,” concluded the chief executive of SETI, looking rather smug. The secretary general and Party chairman shook his hand and asked for well mannered, peaceful celebrations. Even the bushfire micro-wars out of system were ordered to make the day a ceasefire. For the first time since arriving on Earth I felt truly happy.

Fireworks were still being set off in the public square when Chairman Gawk waddled down from his ivory tower to shake his hand and congratulate his company on being funder of SETI for years, telling everyone he had been a silent supporter of Saganist viewers for years and genuinely hogging the credit, but he didn't spoil the festivities too much. I got drunk for the third time in my life, with Taela and some people from a research team. Even in the clubs, subbed videos off scientists discussing what type of craft scans showed them to be and what this could mean for everyone. The crafts had just past very close Triton, early scans showing them to be a good half a dozen miles long. Interestingly, work on the Needle didn't cease. Most of the offices and work cubicles were deserted but still the teams of designers, builders, architects and engineers toiled at adding even more height to it. Special measures had to be adopted to avoid space junk colliding with it, a few of the other corporations had complained satellite had bumped into it.

It was a few minutes until the craft were due to pass by and was sitting in my cubicle when Taela came to me. In the buzz and euphoria of what was now being dubbed 'the contact festivities' we hadn't had a chance to really see each other. Not in the same way as when we saw each other in the battery room. Every attempt to hail the strange ships, every handshake, hello, or greeting had been ignored, regardless of the frequency. It did feel like that, as a species, humanity was being rather rudely snubbed. No space craft had been allowed to interfere with these new ships. It was decided in a rare moment of sanity by the Security Council to stand back and wait.

"I'm surprised everyone is so happy about all this." She had dispensed with her usual pill dispenser and inhaler—the parties and celebrations were taking their toll.

"That is cynicism," I murmured, focussing on a plain view of a satellite that would weave out spun carbon fibre cable and pull upon the needle from space, relieving the now stressed structures beneath the ground. "Why does it have to be a bad thing?"

I stood up and looked at her. She had one of those plastic alien masks around her neck, the ones that were being handed out to everyone by the Saganists. A joke really, no one could even guess as to what they would look like, it was just a bit of fun.

"Who is considering the what ifs?"

I put on the mask for her, it was a parody of an alien, big mandibles, bugged eyed. Very un-PC, I thought, suppressing a laugh.

"Now you are asking questions and being neurotic."

We walked together to one of the screens on the wall. It normally showed either the news round up or pastoral country views; it now showed the latest 3D, super enhanced pictures from Luna, which did amount to some vaguely glowing lights in an expanse of black firmament, it was easy to forget how big and empty space was. Taela held my hand and we watched, waiting to see history, excited for and dreading what would happen.

The chaos that followed that day in the office is hard to describe and harder to think about. Riots shook the city like a tsunami; shops formerly full of designer clothes and electronics were gutted, the remains of what looters couldn't take hanging out of them like innards. Small fires blossomed across the landscape, new red flowers blooming in an inorganic place, military vehicles buzzed about the sky, angry insects amongst the rising columns of smoke. Gunfire was an almost constant sound, ricocheting around deserted streets, a soundtrack to what felt like the end of the world. The power was shut off for a day. I was used to darkness back home but here in the city it felt eerie. Rather than the sound of animals and insects the noise that permeated the gloom was that of shouting, artillery fire and emergency vehicles. I hugged Taela tight under the sheets. We believed some of the mobs had gotten closer to our apartment block. We stayed like that a whole day, no lights, no television, internet, just us and the sounds of the city gradually burning itself out in anger, a cantankerous two year old tiring itself in its violent tantrum.

Gawk came to us, not dressed in designer fabrics for once, and with surprisingly less of a lisp, and told us with an air of calm solemnity that it was safest if we left with him and the other executives. I appreciated that he came and told us this in person. Unlike most important people who flee where they live in disgrace, Gawk didn't have a massive suitcase of golden bars or a bag full of antique jewellery. Apart from his clothes he only took one thing, his mushroom plant.

"I am sorry about this," I said to Taela as she huddled in the narrow bunk, my spine doinking painfully against the bulkhead.

"Sorry for what?"

Weeks of being unable to wash properly hadn't affected her looks too much.

"Just sorry."

"You didn't destroy the craft," she assured me, swigging from a bottle of doubly recycled water. It was rare we got privacy in the cramped confines of the tugs accommodation section. Most of the behemoth space ship was given over to cold storage for food.

"Maybe I did."

No matter what happened, what I did, I always came back to the same thoughts, the same conversation. I destroyed the craft. Seeing a few lights on the screen wink out wasn't so dramatic. It's all that the Earth's population saw. Seeing the Needle and knowing what it had done was worse.

"I hope they pull it down."

She stroked my hair and cooed but I pushed her away and stood up, still having to hunch slightly. The accommodation section had an incredibly low hanging ceiling.

“All that power...” I looked for the right word, “...zuzing off into those ships...”

She turned back to sleep, talking about it made me feel a bit better but she had listened enough. It was horrible to imagine; the Needle buzzing inside with electric, arcing out its deadly power as the craft closed in. I had started drinking the mushroom beer, it helped as well. Everyone had their version of events to tell and everyone shared blamed. The drunken executives would bemoan what they had done, and I in turn would bemoan what I'd designed, then they'd drunkenly hug me, stinking of sweat and whiskey. That part wasn't so cathartic.

“None of us really knew what was gonna happen,” she soothed from the feculent, deflated pillow.

“We killed them.”

I was tired of talking about it and repeated it often as a little mantra, it didn't make it seem any more real.

“Shut up and go to sleep.”

She kicked me idly but I didn't come back to bed. I strolled around the tug for a while, still thinking of what the poor creatures inside the craft must have thought as the Needle transmitted its raw waves of electric. How much? A million exahertz? A trillion? What were bigger than exahertz? I'm sure I used to know.

After a few weeks we docked on Titan. Normally I'd have wanted to see what the moon looked like but I couldn't be bothered in my current state. It was at one of the lesser known stations, probably it was a front for drug or gun running, the perfect place for people not wishing to be seen. Apparently there was some sort of medical doctor who eked out a measly, near-poverty existence studying the moulds and algae that grew on the barren rock of the moon. Gawk claimed it was important we see him.

The rest of the executives, stripped of the glamour and glitz, looked like refugees of some terrible natural disaster. Armani silks sweat stained and formally coiffed, lacquered hair styles becoming frazzled and greasy. I suppose I felt a little pang of schadenfreude to see how the mighty had fallen. I didn't know why this doctor had been called for. Perhaps they had laundered away some money with him in the past (such things were common, money could be easily smuggled away under the guise of 'donation to the sciences'), or were hoping for appearance altering surgery. Gawk insisted that I come to the meeting with him, Taela too, though she was still nursing a hangover and opted to stay in her bunk.

“It'll be, what was that word you used?” Gawk had become a more silent, stern sort of man and

we talked with greater ease a lot more.

“Cathartic,” I reminded him. He liked that word. Once I explained the meaning he said it summed up what he wanted quite nicely.

“Yes, this will be cathartic for everyone.”

The executives had all gathered in a circle in the main hanger, awaiting the doctor’s arrival and his apparent ‘cathartic’ revelations. Doctor Barke, a ragged, scraggily beatnik type, with a huge beard and fraying dreadlocks knotted up with beads, came aboard with what I can only assume was a retinue of bed girls. “Grad Students,” he assured me. He smoked some vile tobacco he’d concocted from the mould out of a shisha pipe, sitting cross legged on the naked steel floor looking like some parody of an Indian Guru.

“I’ve been researchin’ for some time your mushroom things,” he claimed, his voice floaty and distant. “They’re, like, real interestin’, take a look, take a look.”

He unrolled his palmtop and showed off some microscope photographs of the mushrooms up close. They looked like surreal paintings done by a crack addict, all fine white hairs. It was only a lot later I realised what they really reminded me of—the fibre optics of the battery room.

“Interestin’, no?”

“No,” Gawk snapped back, the Doctor just laughed breathily, followed by his bed girls.

“No, but to the scientific mind, they are incredibly rare. A form of parasitic fungus.”

He blew smoke from his shisha into Gawk’s face. Due to the strained conditions of the onboard oxygen scrubbers Gawk had to forego smoking and he breathed in the vapour gratefully. “Its spores enter the atmosphere and grow into the brain stem, very unique way of propagating I think, very interesting.”

He began to rock forward and backward and I began to wonder if it really was just tobacco in the shisha pipe.

“Just tell me what...what I think I already worked out,” Gawk insisted, Doctor Barke nodded and showed some represent of DNA.

“This has been altered in much the same way our dear Mr Gawk likes to alter DNA.”

The representations looked like something I would design, some immense structure for an incredibly tall and complex building.

“You have all been drinking the mushroom...” The doctor looked like he was part of some very cruel but hilarious prank.

“...the fungus, a cordyceps, if you wanna use the official term, has got into you. It’s identified the brainstem as how your bodies are moved around and it has gotten in there, Mr Gawk, been doin’ some very interestin’ engineerin’..”

Doctor Barke and all his bed girls were smiling. The heady smoky now hung thick inside the room, my mouth felt dry and the Doctor himself began to bend and distort like some horribly Boschian vision. I hoped what he was saying was caused by whatever was in the shisha pipe. Sadly it wasn’t that strong.

“It is a very unique specimen indeed. Rather than just over running the brain it has implanted an idea. Probably only spread out a coupla inches.”

“Inside us?”

I wanted to leave or be sick. I thought about hitting the gurning little man but the smoke made me too relaxed.

“Easily influenced is the human brain, especially when ideas like construction are already in there. An evolutionary imperative, if you will. We learnt to build and it’s sorta in the ether, ready for exploitation.”

He twisted about in the smoke. I felt ill and eventually drifted to sleep.

When I awoke we were undocking and Taela was sitting next to me.

“Makes you thing about stuff doesn’t it?” She played with my hair, I climbed to my feet and batted her away, Doctor Bark was still there, examining a sample of mushroom beer. I would never be able to drink the filthy stuff again. Images of sprouting, fibrous growths, spreading about my body, crawling up in my brain, wouldn’t leave. I felt like scratching at my scalp to get the horrible substance out.

“Not really.”

I looked at the unrolled palmtop. It was spooling through more representations of DNA, double helixes twirling around in graceful patterns.

“I think there was once an evolutionary advantage in building tall structures, shelter or water or...whatever,” the Doctor remarked, inhaling from his shisha, a bed girl crept up behind him and started to message his back. “The mycelium probably infected the mammals on Eridani and made it build for them. Maybe everywhere in the universe it’s all about large phallic structures.”

He laughed to himself as he worked, taking out a pair of enzyme scissors.

“Are we going to be growing toadstools out of our asses any day soon?” Taela asked, looking at

the microscope tiny fold out screen. Yes, I can say that up close mushrooms look beautiful, if you look real close.

“This is specially engineered stuff. Only grows a tiny bit and only suggests a little.”

“Otherwise we all coulda been zombified,” I supposed aloud, the terrible images of the mushroom did at least help to cultivate some interesting ideas. The Doctor nodded, I was surprised at how coy and calm he was. I guess news of what happens on Earth doesn’t have to have much relevance out here. Though I’d be surprised if he wasn’t angry too, at how we’d wasted a chance at genuine contact. Despite politics, that was something everybody could get a share in being extremely pissed off at.

“Of cause, there is one thing this theory implies...” I began tentatively, Taela looked up at me with curiosity. “...that these...things, mushrooms or whatever, weren’t grown...”

They were made. I didn’t need to say it, we had all realised it. The doctor continued smiling, slicing up tiny protein strings and inspecting them, trying to see answers in things smaller than a grain of dust.

We travelled for some time, around most of the big inhabited areas of the system and eventually outside of it. The doctor brought equipment from Ganymede; a larger microscope, a set of cryogenic tubes and some more bed girls. He slept with them less as the months wore on, and worked a lot more. Eventually the idea of aliens became rather dry. No word had been heard from Eridani for many weeks and eventually our interest dwindled. Perhaps they’d made a discovery or the mushrooms had been eventually linked to the spaceship’s destruction and the staff of the tiny outpost had been lynched. We still knew nothing about who designed the mushrooms intricate genetics. Probably we never would. The conclusion was that who or whatever they were, they didn’t care for humanity. We would have to wait again for that cosmic telephone to ring once again. I felt guilty but it was a strange guilt, guilt over something nonspecific, it is easier to feel guilty about a person than an entire planet.

We were docking in Hawkintown, the old capital city of the slightly overpopulated dwarf planet that orbited the outermost fringes of Proxima, when Taela approached me. She had gotten slimmer in her time away from Earth. The zero-g had also given her the classic ‘birds chest’ and ‘heron legs’ look, yet she was still beautiful.

“Maybe they were at war with those poor space craft people,” I murmured, looking at the empty black canvas of space. Earth was a distant twinkle now, a bright one, but distant.

“I guess they wanted us to build the needle, using the mushrooms. Probably we don’t even register to them. We are just like the ants.”

Taela put her arms around me and shushed soothingly.

“They probably timed it to perfection, knowing where the space ships were gonna be... destroying them without revealing themselves. Guess we’ll never know, and not knowing drives me crazy.”

Taela hugged me close. She stank, sweat, fried food, unwashed clothing, but it was her stink, she smelled good. Her touch helped dissipate the pool of strange feeling and thoughts that hung about me like a poisonous fog; thoughts of aliens, GM mushrooms and exploding space ships.

“Did you ever think this could be getting in the way of more important stuff?” she asked, nibbling my ear. She was right as usual, soon I would have to put my obsession aside. Take life with a different view, maybe with a shot of vodka and a dollop of curry. Relax and do some proper work, certainly there was no shortage of it ‘out of system’.

“We could jump ship, start anew.”

We smiled and kissed and for the first time I wasn’t thinking of a larger conspiracy and questions with no answers. I was starting to relax. We gathered our meagre possessions and left without saying goodbye. The tiny planet had no air, so we were always looking out into space. As we crossed the boarding tube, feeling gravity’s gentle tug for the first time in many months, I thought of the strange aliens and what terrible conflict might be raging across the stars, with their mushrooms and needles and space craft. Perhaps in time we’d meet them and get to ask ‘why?’ but until then I was content in holding Taela’s hand and walking toward a new adventure. Finally I could relax.

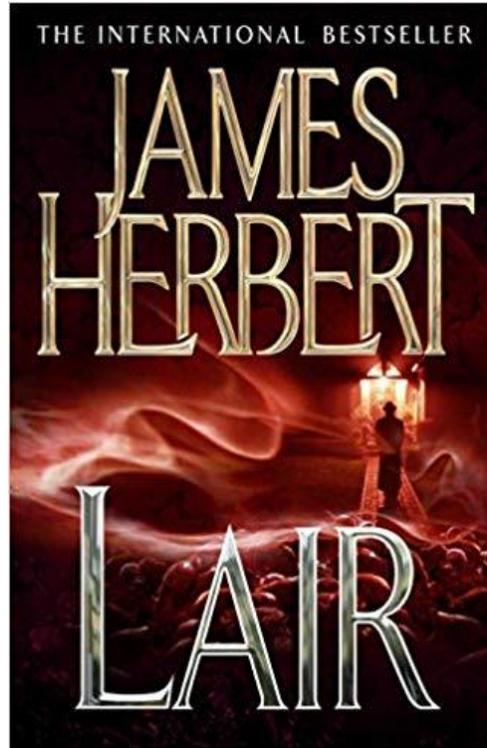
THE END

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REVIEW by John C Adams



Lair

There's something uniquely special about the books you read as a young adult if they're actually set in your hometown. It doesn't take much for the imagination to go to work. And it bumps it up a notch when the author throws a hoard of highly intelligent and super-aggressive vermin predators into the mix. I grew up very near to Epping Forest, so when James Herbert's *Lair* was published in 1979 it pressed all the right buttons.

Four years before the action starts, almost all the mutant giant rats running riot in the East End of London were lured out of their holes and gassed. But a few escaped. They made their way out of the city and found refuge in Epping Forest. For a long time they were too scared to stand up to humans but as their confidence increases the rats rediscover just how much they love the taste of our flesh. This time around, Ratkill's exterminator Lucas Pender is sent to lead the search for the massive beasts after the rats are sighted by an education worker at the conservation centre's outreach programme. It isn't long before the rats have eaten the local vicar alive and are moving on to the adulterous lovers having a bit of nooky in the bushes:

It took a fraction of a second to register the pain, then she screamed and jerked her leg up, reaching for her injured foot, and she screamed again, louder, when she felt the two bloodied stumps that were left of her toes.

Lair combines the terrifying build-up of *The Rats* with a wonderfully precise treatment of a new location. Herbert really captures what it feels like to spend time deep in the forest:

Pender saw the sign for High Beach and swung into the narrow winding road leading from the roundabout. The trees almost met overhead, the bright sun sparkling through dying leaves, and he felt the last ounces of tension drain away.

The forest did have a different atmosphere lately. None of the vicar's parishioners mentioned it but he had caught certain looks in the eyes of the forest keepers. An uneasiness as they studied the undergrowth.

The conservation centre, the church at High Beach, Commercial Road, the police training camp, the mobile home site are all real places and easily locatable. As a teenager, I caught the bus from Ongar one day and hiked the last part of the journey to find the manor house that Herbert used as the location for Seymour Hall, in the heart of the forest. I scared myself witless in the process.

If you're thinking of checking out the locations for yourself, Epping is an easy journey on the Central Line from London, or you can take the M11 from the M25. Weekends and Bank Holidays can be uncomfortably busy but a midweek journey should give you parts of the forest all to yourself. Well, just you and the giant mutant rats waiting in the undergrowth to eat you alive.

Enjoy!

THE END

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SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE BEAST MEN OF ATLANTIS by Milly “Mad Dog”
McGuigan

Chapter Twenty-Three

When I was a small boy, I was taken as an especial treat on a visit to the Crystal Palace. I was fascinated by Waterhouse Hawkins’ antediluvian monsters, although they gave me bad dreams for many weeks after, dreams of endless vistas of ancient horror. Years later, as an adult, I had revisited the Crystal Palace and seen them again, and yet somehow all the horror had vanished, this motley collection of oversized crocodiles seemed laughable. As that beast appeared from the cavern below us, all the bad dreams of boyhood returned with a vengeance.

Halting momentarily as it came out into daylight, the giant reptile tasted the air with its tongue, then lifted its wedge shaped head and roared. It stalked forward on two huge legs, forepaws snatching and grasping at the air. Iridescent green in hue, except along its underbelly where it shaded to creamy white, its skin was covered in scales like those of a serpent. A long tail lashed back and forth. Its great hind paws shook the earth as it approached the rock spur. Two malignant red eyes glowed in deep eye sockets.

‘How can you offer up a sacrifice?’ Miss Marency cried. ‘Your victim has escaped you!’

‘The god of the volcano must be fed!’ Newbold, now back in his Archpriest garb, seized her by the arms. ‘And it is you who shall feed him!’

Frowning, I stepped forwards. ‘Stop him, Watson!’ cried Holmes.

Miss Marency and Newbold struggled on the edge of the rock spur as the antediluvian beast peered upwards. It had been called and it knew that it would be fed. The tiny creatures that added such piquancy to its subterranean diet were up there, but it knew from long experience that luncheon was imminent.

I stumbled forwards to seize Newbold, but before I could reach him, he flung Miss Marency into the abyss.

And yet even as he did so, she somehow curled one leg round his own, and he was jerked from his perch on the crag.

I raced to the side, Holmes just beside me, to see them tumbling through the air, Newbold’s robes flapping around his plummeting form like futile wings. They hit the sandy bottom of the chasm and lay motionless.

The volcano god stomped forwards, attracted by their appearance.

‘By G-d, Watson,’ gasped Holmes, ‘are they dead? That fall must have been enough to kill them.’

Miss Marency's tiny figure stirred. 'No, Holmes,' I said bleakly. 'The sand is soft enough to cushion their fall. And so it has always been. He-Beneath-The-Fire-Mountain likes live prey.'

Miss Marency rose to her feet and faced the monster. She drew herself up, unafraid. There was no escape back up the cliff, no escape by running. And so she stood there in silence, unmoving, with Newbold lying motionless at her feet.

I saw Newbold's rifle lying on the ledge below me. Galvanised, I said to Holmes, 'Help me climb down!'

For a moment he looked uncomprehendingly at me. Then he understood what I was saying.

With Holmes' aid, I scrambled down the side of the crag as far as the ledge, which was about six or seven feet below. I clung onto the rock with one hand and reached out for the rifle with the other. From my grandstand position, I saw Newbold had recovered. He got to his feet, took one look at the approaching monster, and ran to the crag, which he attempted to climb with little success. Confused, the monster peered from Newbold to Miss Marency, then opened its jaws.

Just as its mouth was closing round Miss Marency's form, I snatched up the rifle, aimed one handed, and fired.

The recoil knocked me from my perch and I went tumbling head over heels down the side of the crag. With a bone jarring thud, I hit another ledge halfway down and lay there like one dead.

'Watson?' Holmes' voice awoke me from my daze. 'Watson, get up.'

'Let me lie here,' I muttered. 'I'm tired. Bone weary. I should never have come to this country, Holmes. It's finished me.'

'Don't be absurd,' Holmes cried. 'Take my hand.'

I looked up. Holmes clung to a ledge just above my own, holding out his right hand.

'The volcano god?' I asked.

'You got it,' laughed Holmes, 'right between the eyes. The priests are angry. Out for your blood.' The edge of the abyss above us was lined with wrathful beast men. Of the rifle there was no sign.

Rising to a crouch, I looked down into the abyss, where the carcass of the monster lay unmoving. It was the only thing visible below. I noticed that vultures were already circling in the skies above. 'And Miss Marency?' I asked.

'She was crushed beneath the beast when you shot it,' said Holmes. 'Newbold's whereabouts are

a mystery.’

‘What do we do now?’ I asked Holmes. ‘We can’t stay here.’

‘I don’t think we will be here long,’ said Holmes meaningfully. I looked up. The beast men were beginning to descend the crag, spears gleaming in their hands.

In seemingly no time they had surrounded us. There was no escape, except to leap headlong into the abyss, and I was in no fit state to attempt that. The beast men urged us back up the rock face until we were standing on the spur beside the gong.

Before us stood the tatterdemalion figure I took to be the ambitious priest known as He-In-Rags. Seething with wrath, he capered and leapt before us, threatening us with a feather clad staff. Holmes looked censoriously down his nose at the fellow and shook his head. The beast man seemed to blame Holmes for the death of his god. I resented this.

‘Leave him,’ I said. ‘It is I who you killed your god.’

The beast man turned and peered at me. A sniffing sound came from beneath its mask. It jabbed an accusing paw at me and hooted. A rumble of wrath rose from the assembled priests and temple guards. My message had somehow got through.

Next I knew, I was seized by the beast man’s claw and lifted from my feet. Holmes shouted something and tried to fight his way forwards, but he was seized by many paws and restrained. The beast man must have been incredibly strong, I thought numbly as I found myself dangling once more over the edge. He-In-Rags yelled out a terrible invocation, preparatory to flinging me from the crag. All I could see below me were sharp rocks. The soft sand where Miss Marency and Newbold had fallen was taken up by the carcass of the monster. I recognised a glint of metal far below as my rifle.

A shot rang out and the beast man lurched suddenly. The sky spun around me as my captor toppled. I shot out my hands to cling onto the ledge. The beast men were in an uproar. What had happened? I could see nothing except the beast man’s corpse with a bullet hole between the eyeholes of his mask.

I craned my neck around, looking out across the chasm. And then I saw a splendid, beautiful sight.

Standing on the far lip of the chasm, trade musket still smoking, surrounded on either side by her warriors, was Queen Ayaba.

The beast men were less delighted than I. Though demoralised by the death of their god, they were still able and willing to fight. Advancing round either side of the chasm they attacked the Nkume warriors. Even those on the rock spur abandoned us, rushing off to fight the newcomers.

I sat down and Holmes came to sit beside me as the two tribes fought it out.

‘I thought the Nkume had been driven off,’ I remarked. ‘Driven off if not slaughtered wholesale.’

‘The war party that came with us sustained many losses,’ Holmes said, ‘but remember, there were other groups at the other diamond mines, and we sent men to rouse them. When the queen escaped, she must have met up with these other warriors, and returned just in the nick of time.’

It soon became clear that all was up for the priests. With the advantage of their muskets, the Nkume soon overcame them, and the survivors knelt at the feet of Queen Ayaba like feudal vassals. Accompanied by her musket bearing warriors, she strode through them, a proud, fierce barbarian monarch. Seeing where we were, she came to join us upon the rocky.

‘Today has been an ill day for the priest folk,’ she said. ‘In future, it is they who will be the slaves, while the Nkume rule. With our diamond mines we can become a power in the world.’

Smiling, I agreed with her. But secretly I feared that even with firearms and diamonds, sooner or later their land would fall prey to one colonial power or another. I hoped to G-d it would be Britain.

‘Well,’ said Holmes briskly, dusting off his palms, ‘now that the war between Nkume and the priests has reached a satisfactory conclusion, I think it is time we also brought our mission in this country to a close.’

Both the queen and I stared at him in surprise.

Chapter Twenty-Four

‘What on earth can you mean, Holmes?’ I cried. ‘Surely the case that brought us to Africa is long solved. Besides, Miss Marency who retained your services is no doubt dead despite my best endeavours.’

Holmes rubbed his long nose thoughtfully. ‘That may be the case,’ he admitted. ‘And perhaps Inspector Newbold too is no longer with us. His culpability for Sir Digory’s murder is assured and yet I am determined to prosecute this case to its end and see him tried in an English court.’

I peered over the cliff. Apart from the cooling carcass of He-Beneath-The-Fire-Mountain, there was no sign of anyone, certainly no indication of life other than the vultures that had swooped down to fight over those reptilian remains.

‘I too would see my father’s killer see justice,’ said the queen.

She beckoned to Keobula and Ulu-Oru, who joined us on the rocky spur, and explained the situation to them. Ulu-Oru nodded sombrely, while Keobula pounded his chest, spoke proudly and at some length, and indicated his warriors with widespread hand and a grin.

‘What does your war chief say?’ I asked the queen.

‘He and his men will accompany Mr Holmes and Dr Watson to the ends of the earth to bring back the man who killed my father,’ she told me.

I crossed over to Keobula and shook his big hand.

‘I hope that won’t be necessary,’ said Holmes. ‘I believe we will find the solution to our small problem at the bottom of the chasm.’

I took another look. Again I saw nothing but the giant carcass of my kill and the vermin that fought over it. ‘Are you certain, Holmes?’ I inquired. ‘It seems to me that one way or another our foes have escaped justice.’

‘That may be the case, Dr Watson,’ Holmes said. ‘But until I have seen the evidence, I shall not be satisfied. Let us go down at once!’

And so with Keobula and five Nkume warriors we began.

Although I had traversed some of that rocky steep already that day, it had been involuntarily and in the heat of battle and I had had little thought for the risks. This climb, though under less fraught circumstances and with the aid of Keobula’s stalwart warriors, was an arduous descent that I would not otherwise have countenanced without the aid of ropes and pitons. Such equipment was unknown in Nkume, and we must descend gingerly by foot and hand.

Although the height of the crag was such that those cast from its top would not die if they received a soft landing, its sides were so broken and slippery that the descent was interminable. It seemed that forever I was inching from one rocky outcrop to the next, all in the blazing heat of that tropical sun—until we passed out of the latter’s reach and entered the dark shadows of the chasm. Here it was dank and drear, and the going grew even riskier on the emerald green moss that swathed the rocks. Once I slipped from my perch and for a dizzying moment seemed doomed to plummet to my death on the rocks below, but then a hand seized my wrist and a grinning Nkume swung me back into a place where I could find a handhold and a foothold.

At last, however, we reached a spot close enough to the uneven rocky floor of the chasm to leap down. Holmes jumped first, landing in the lee of the great volcano god, his appearance occasioning the sudden squawking ascent of a multitude of avian scavengers, like flies from rotting meat. The vultures circled in the mouth of the chasm above us, where the queen and her people were still visible, watching us.

I jumped next, and landed beside Holmes, who was already looking about him keenly, his eyes alert for any clues. The sandy expanse where the sacrifices had been flung vanished into the yawning cavern mouth, which had seemed much smaller from above. Now it was clear that the cave was the opening of a great shaft that led deep into the bowels of the earth. I glanced at the scaly carcass of the volcano god, now riddled with bloody rips and tears of gore where the

vultures and other carrion beasts had been feasting upon it. The back of its head was also a mass of blood—from where my bullet had pierced its skull, I realised.

From what subterranean caverns had that creature issued forth? How had it survived down there? Had it been trapped, and only came into the chasm to feed upon the sacrifices, or had it lived a complex subterranean life of its own. Were there others of its kind at the far end of the shaft? I shuddered at the thought of a whole subterranean world seething with antediluvian life.

One by one, Keobula and his warriors jumped or climbed down to join us. They were wary, eyes wide as they stared around them at what must have been to them the land of their god, tyrant though he had been. The god was dead, though, and Keobula was so blasphemous as to aim a kick at the squamous hide. He grinned at me and brandished his musket.

‘Dead now,’ he said in broken English. ‘They all dead.’

Holmes had been a short way away, investigating the sand beyond the creature. He looked up. ‘I think not, sir,’ he cried. ‘I think that one of our foes survived, and has fled us’—he paused dramatically and pointed at the yawning cavern mouth—‘in there!’

‘Holmes!’ I ejaculated. ‘You can’t possibly mean...’

I broke off at a groaning sound from behind me. Lumbering round, I saw that the noise was coming from the monster’s head. For an insane moment I thought that the volcano god was not truly dead, that it had been somehow stunned by my shot, and now it was waking up to wreak an awful revenge. I tensed instinctively, as if to run—but where? There would be no escape up the side of the crag, not with an antediluvian monster on our heels. And where else was there to go? Down the shaft into the mysterious underground realm from whence it came?

The groan was repeated. Although it was weirdly magnified, I knew then that it could not be the sound of the monster. It was a human voice. A woman’s voice.

Holmes strode over. He gestured to the Nkume and with their aid and mine, managed to lift the creature’s head up sufficiently to reveal a bedraggled, dazed figure lying in the sand beneath.

‘Miss Marency!’ said Holmes, as she rose into a feral crouch, peering round at us. ‘May I suggest that you move away? We will not be able to keep this cadaver raised from the ground indefinitely.’

She walked lithely into the open and we allowed the creature’s head to fall back to the sand with a ground shaking thud. She dusted herself down and turned to face Holmes. ‘You came after me, then,’ she stated.

‘You flatter yourself, Miss Marency,’ said Holmes. ‘We came after your father’s killer. We are still in pursuit of Inspector Newbold.’

She drew a weary hand across her brow, and gazed up at the high walls of the chasm. High

overhead the sun was shining fiercely, and the vultures circled above us. She looked down again and saw the ring of dark faces that greeted her sullenly.

‘I’m impressed by your tenacity, Mr Holmes,’ she said, ‘but I must release you from my service. What I have perpetrated in this country has been worse than any murder. I have worked alongside evil to commit evil.’

She turned to gaze at the great carcass of the volcano god. ‘Who was it who saved me from being devoured by this monster?’

Holmes gestured at me. ‘Dr Watson was instrumental,’ he said. ‘He most valiantly and gallantly seized Newbold’s fallen rifle and sent a round down the volcano god’s great gullet. He hoped to rescue you, and now it seems his hope was fulfilled.’

She glanced at me, and I saw gratitude in that look, though it was a gratitude mingled with self-loathing. ‘You would have been better to let it eat me up,’ she said.

‘Nonsense,’ I told her sternly. ‘I couldn’t stand by and watch you fall prey to that fiend.’

She looked up at the lip of the chasm again. ‘Is there any way out of here?’ she asked. ‘I understood that the walls of this pit were unscalable.’

Holmes shrugged. ‘We climbed down,’ he said, ‘although the going was far from easy. So logic dictates that it would be possible to make a return journey. Besides, we have the Nkume to aid us...’

‘But will they assist me?’ Miss Marency asked quietly. ‘The Archpriest is gone, I gather; the volcano god is dead for certain—but I was as great a tyrant over the Nkume as either. I would have thought that they would think it better to leave me down here to rot.’

She eyed Keobula and his warriors bleakly. I never saw her show fear, but that moment was a dark one for her. She appealed to Holmes. ‘Will you aid me?’ When he proved implacable, she turned to me. ‘Dr Watson?’

‘Why did you do it, Miss Marency?’ I asked sadly. ‘You came to Holmes looking for someone who would help your father. When he was killed despite our best efforts, the investigation became a pursuit of his murderer. But I don’t see how it reached this point—empire building and slavery for your personal enrichment.’

‘I grew up in the bush,’ Miss Marency told me levelly. ‘Despite the veneer of civilisation that the Swiss finishing school bestowed upon me, I am as much of a savage as those inbred Atlantean beast men, these Nkume warriors. I have seen how African tribes have fallen before the colonial powers. I know that this is ongoing, that one day everywhere from Cape to Cairo will come under the sway of the Great Powers unless the inhabitants learn to resist. My sympathy is with the savages, not the civilised folk.’

‘Then why did you exploit them?’ I asked. ‘You have treated them abominably, worse than the Spanish conquistadors with the poor Indians in Mexico. You tell me that all this was done for their own benefit?’

She nodded seriously. ‘I knew that this decadent lost city would crumble under the assault of British or French or Prussian armies. Knowing that its territory contains great riches, I saw that if it only learnt to put them to use, Nkume could become great enough to resist the invaders. I discussed this with the Archpriest, and he seemed easily persuadable. His people have considered the Nkume their vassals for many generations. Besides, only the blacks had previous experience of mining. The priests would have been worse than useless as a labour force.

‘Oh, I knew that you or Mr Holmes would be resistant to the idea. I knew that you would continue your seemingly fruitless quest for my father’s killer. So I had you kept out of the way for a while.’ Her face grew cold. ‘How could I have guessed that the leader of the priests was the murderer in disguise? How could I ever know that? Or that he had his own plan to exploit the diamond mines—for his own enrichment. It must have amused him to suborn the daughter of the man he killed in the pursuit of his schemes.’

Holmes was growing impatient. ‘All this is fascinating, Miss Marency,’ he said. ‘However, it is keeping us from the task in hand: of tracking down Newbold and bringing him to justice.’

Miss Marency laughed bitterly. ‘How single minded you are, Mr Holmes,’ she said. ‘How tenacious. No wonder you have earned that reputation as a dogged sleuth-hound that you enjoy in the Old Country. But I told you. I release you from my service. I no longer require you to bring him to justice. It is perhaps more important that I receive justice myself.’

I could see no reason to pursue Newbold, who had seemingly vanished into the bowels of the earth, now that Miss Marency had released us from her service. I said so.

‘You seem to forget,’ said Holmes, indicating Keobula and the Nkume warriors who had been listening and watching in incomprehension. ‘We were sent down here not to find Miss Marency but once again on the trail of Newbold. Miss Marency’s royal sister is now our employer. Queen Ayaba wishes us to bring her father’s killer to justice, and has provided us with these steadfast fellows for the purpose. And so we are honour-bound to descend into the caves where Newbold has taken refuge, and to bring him back, dead or alive as they say on the American frontier. Dead or alive.’

I turned to stare in horror at the yawning mouth of the cave.

‘Down there?’ I demanded, as the warriors made preparations, carving steaks off the beast’s flanks and wrapping them in skins.

‘Of course,’ said Holmes. ‘Are you game?’

I stared at him. Had the journey only begun? What would we find down in the caves where monsters lingered from an age beyond history? Would we locate Newbold, or would he evade us

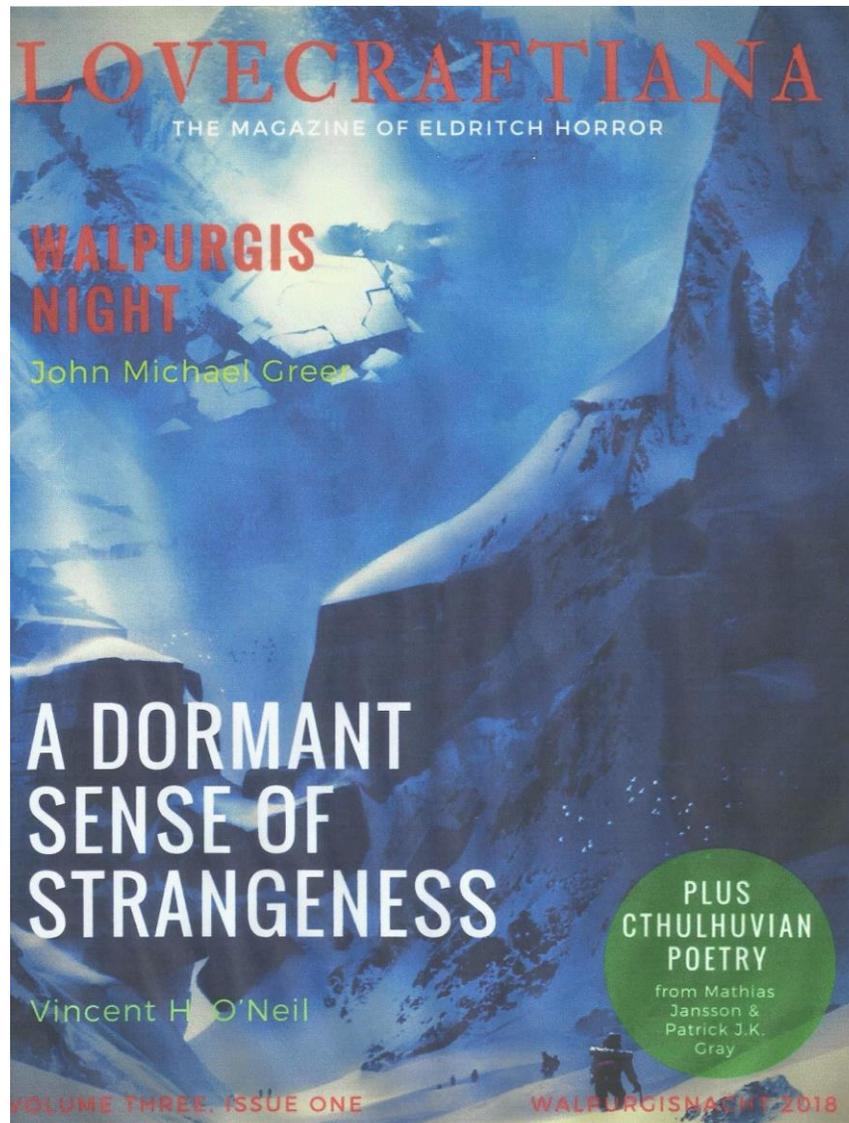
forever?

‘Yes,’ I said at last. ‘I’m game.’

A slim figure joined us.

‘Can I come with you?’ asked Miss Marency.

THE END



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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Eighteen

“Aren’t you guys lookin’ fine?” Mud asked them when Illara and Hardy met up with him again on the bridge of the “Charon”.

Like Mud himself, they wore silver jumpsuits. The suits were dirty, worn and frayed, not just at the knees and the elbows, but also and more dramatically at the ankles, the wrists, and the throats. Strands of aluminized fabric hung loosely from the many patches stitched into the suits.

“Sloppy, real sloppy,” Illara grinned.

“Yeah,” Hardy agreed. “Man, would I draw stares back on the ship,” Hardy said.

“Oh, you look fine,” Illara said, patting Hardy on the cheek. “Rugged. A real mountain man.”

Then she turned to the wide window that took up the forward bulkhead of the bridge. Mud stood at hand, grinning.

“I have to say, Mud,” Illara said to him, “You do give us a beautiful view. I’ve always liked that about you.”

Stars filled the window, the Milky Way pouring itself across the measureless firmament.

Mud grinned.

“I knew you were coming,” he said. “So I cleaned my windows just for you.”

“Always the gentleman,” Illara said. She looped her arm through Mud’s then said, “Now it’s been a long trip. Why don’t you buy a girl a drink, and we’ll sit down someplace nice and make plans, shall we?”

“I can see you’re the brains of this operation,” Mud chuckled. “If yuh’ll follow along, I’ll bring y’all to the galley where I got my replicator. We can sit and drink and think.”

“Sounds like a real good plan,” Hardy said.

Mud’s ship bragged two galleys. One was attached to a dining room and could accommodate as many as six people at a time. The other—the one to which Mud was now escorting his guests - was but a tiny room which held but a single replicator, a round tabletop mounted upon a post that thrust itself up from the floor. It was surrounded by three stools.

Piercing the bulkhead that faced the exterior of the “Charon” was a tiny window, of transparent steel, as were the windows at the bridge of the ship. It was only but three feet in length and two feet in height, but it was sufficient to give to the tiny galley a sense of openness that did much to

ward off the creeping claustrophobia that was the hazard of every deep space journey.

“Works better’n visiscreens,” Mud said, after Illara her appreciation of the window.

“The brain knows what it’s lookin’ at, is what I’m guessing,” Mud continued. “Pixels is pixels, y’know? But real is real. And the brain knows it, when it’s lookin’ at pixels, after a while.

“Maybe not all at once. Maybe yuh won’t pick it up for a long time, but, ya know, work with pixels for a couple years, and finally the difference jumps out atcha. You may not know whatcher lookin’ at, but you do know it’s not somethin’ natural.”

“I know what you mean,” Illara agreed. “And I guess you put it as well as I ever could. Yeah, the visiscreens are great, but they don’t beat looking at something with your own naked eye.”

“I’m sure you guys are right, and I agree with you,” Hardy joined in. “But I do have to say that in a dogfight, those visiscreens sure do come in handy...”

“Haw! Yer right about that!” Mud answered.

“But now have a seat, and tell me whatcha’ll have. And we can make our plans.”

“Sangria for me,” Illara said, sliding onto one of the three stools. Hardy sat next to her. “Whatever beer you’ve got is fine with me.”

“Yah, I remember. You weren’t too particular about yer beer,” Mud said. He turned to the replicator, “Gimme two `Outer Rims’, wouldja, friend? And a sangria for the lady.”

A nearly silent hum, a bluish white light filled the room. Half a moment later, Mud pulled the three drinks out of the replicator, handing two off to Illara and Hardy.

A round of `thanks’ from both of them, and Mud took up the final stool. Illara took a long sip from her drink then, leaning with her elbow upon the table, she stared out the window at the stars.

“I can never get enough of it, gazing at them,” she said.

“I ditto you on that,” Mud agreed.

“So, let’s get started, eh? Who goes first?” Illara asked, looking to Mud and Captain Hardy.

“I guess that would be me,” Captain Hardy said. “We’re getting our orders from Earth. All on Secretary Benson’s direct orders. And those orders come to us from him through General Howe, then Colonel Westland, to me.

“So that’s the authority. I’m here with you guys because that’s what Westland wanted. Says we work well together.”

“Okay,” Illara said.

“Sure thing, doggie boys,” Mud agreed.

“So, that’s the `who’ of it. As for the `what’ of it all... well, Secretary Benson is making noises about launching a full scale attack on the Eastern Alliance, an easy target and no match for the Alliance of Eastern States.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, “Why?” Illara and Hardy blurted out. “He’s been making noises about Mars all this time. Now, suddenly, he wants to attack the Eastern Alliance? Why?”

Hardy spread his arms and answered them with a silent and elaborate shrug.

“Who the heck knows?” he asked them all. “Who the heck knows anything about these guys? General Howe says Benson is crazy, according to what Westland told me. His grand idea, just a couple Earth years ago, was Mars. Reclaiming Mars for the corporations that built those cities. That was his deal.”

“Yes,” Illara said. “That’s what Story told me. He says Benson has always been hot around the collar.”

“Yeah, well, that thing with Callisto sidetracked those plans.

“Of course,” Mud said. “Which is what brings us here. So why’s he threatening another war?”

“Honestly, for a lot of these guys,” Hardy answered, “I think it’s just war for its own sake. It’s war because they want it, and they can fine enough people to go along with them to make it happen. I guess,” Hardy finished up with another shrug.

“This is all real innarestin’,” Mud said. “But what’s it got to do with us?”

“Nothing at all,” Hardy answered with slight grin and a glance at Mud. “Just making conversation, is all. But no, whatever the cause of it, Benson is getting real itchy. The attack on Callisto left him unhinged. How that involves us is this; according General Howe, Benson is planning a full scale campaign against the Scroungers. He wants to `blast them all to nothing’.

“Only a unified Earth is capable of that—so the smart thinking goes...”

“Whatever that means,” Illara interjected, sipping on her sangria.

“Yeah,” Hardy replied. As a concomitant to his career, Hardy had often been in the company of, and had attended a few marathon meetings with the `smart thinkers’ to whom he was referring and, like Illara, had come away, most unimpressed.

“But the guys who can push the buttons, smart or not, or whatever they like to call themselves,

well, they've come up with some sort of grand scheme that they, the smart ones, say will unfold over the next forty or fifty years. It's got a lotta pieces to it."

"Well, I do hope you put those pieces together more quickly," Mud said. "I'm starting to nod off here."

"Can't. I don't know the pieces," Hardy explained. "Or how they go together. All I know is that these guys have worked out a plan that involves wiping out the Scroungers and taking all their bases, retaking Mars and unifying Earth."

"Quite the laundry list," Illara said.

Hardy raised his eyebrows. "Uh-huh," he said. "The main question, is seems is who goes first? Do the big boys go after Mars first? Or the Eastern Alliance?"

Mud leaned backward from the table and said to the replicator.

"Two more beers and another sangria," he said to it with a lazy grace. As he handed the drinks out, he simply said, "Can't be forgetting my hospitality now."

"Anyway gang, what this all means is that we are the tip of the spear," Hardy said, after taking a sip from his beer.

"All the information we send back, Benson and his boys are going to use it to map out their campaign against the Scroungers. To wipe them out," Hardy said.

"Well, hell, I don't guess anybody even knows how many there are," Mud said. "So how does Benson plan to kill them all, if he dudn't know how many there are?"

"That's what we're doing. We're sniffing out this Astra Palace," Hardy explained. "Because Benson figures that if the Scroungers have anything like a central headquarters, or a capitol or something, Astra Palace must be it. And once we've worked our way in there, then we work our way outward, back toward Jupiter."

"All right," Illara said. "We've been through a lot of this before. Now what?"

"I've talked about why we're going where we're going. I'll turn the floor over then, to Mister Mud, who can tell us about the `where'."

"All righty," Mud said. "But I guess I oughta remind y'all that the reason I'm out here is I'm looking for Ward. Once we found him, well, we'll see what happens. If ya can keep me entertained (he said with a grin), maybe I'll run with you guys for a while."

"Mister Mud," Hardy replied. "I hope I haven't been taking you for granted. I really do appreciate everything you've already done for us. We've been through a lot together, since that time you shipped with Colonel Westland and me to Callisto. You know, that was the first time I

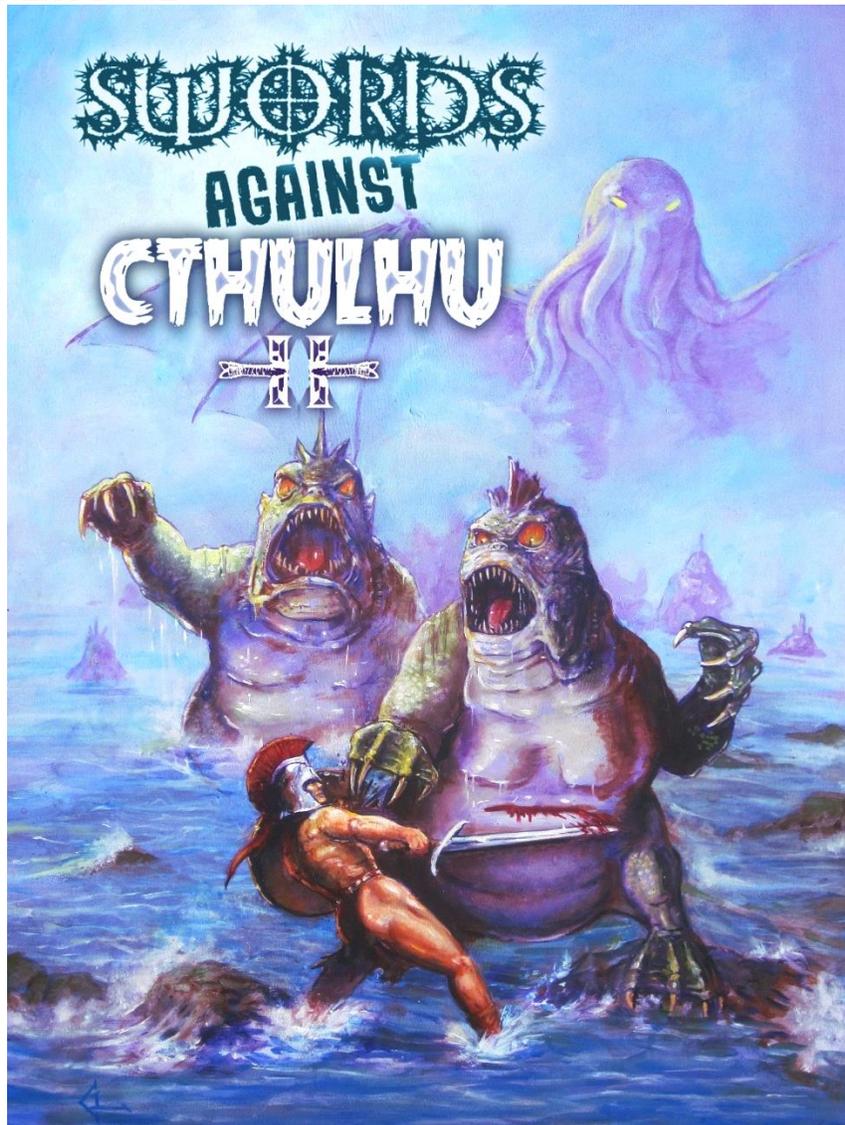
ever went up against the Scroungers.”

“S’awrite,” Mud said, tapping the rim of his plastic mug of beer against Captain Hardy’s. “Don’ worry about hurtin’ my feelings. Just felt I owed it to ya to tell ya not to count on me too much. I wouldn’t.”

The three shared a laugh.

“Now, about this asteroid we’re going to, and the people on it,” Mud said, sipping on his beer.

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE



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ACROSS THE ZODIAC by Percy Greg

Chapter XXIV—Winter.

Hitherto I had experienced only the tropical climate of Mars, with the exception of the short time spent in the northern temperate zone about the height of its summer. I was anxious, of course, to see something also of its winter, and an opportunity presented itself. No institution was more obviously worth a visit than the great University or principal place of highest education in this world, and I was invited thither in the middle of the local winter. To this University many of the most promising youths, especially those intended for any of the Martial professions—architects, artists, rulers, lawyers, physicians, and so forth—are often sent directly from the schools, or after a short period of training in the higher colleges. It is situate far within the north temperate zone on the shore of one of the longest and narrowest of the great Martial gulfs, which extends from north-eastward to south-west, and stretches from 43° N. to 10° S. latitude. The University in question is situate nearly at the extremity of the northern branch of this gulf, which splits into two about 300 miles from its end, a canal of course connecting it with the nearest sea-belt. I chose to perform this journey by land, following the line of the great road from Amacasfe to Qualveskinta for about 800 miles, and then turning directly northward. I did not suppose that I should find a willing companion on this journey, and was myself wishful to be alone, since I dared not, in her present state of health, expose Eveena to the fatigue and hardship of prolonged winter travelling by land. To my surprise, however, all the rest, when aware that I had declined to take her, were eager to accompany me. Chiefly to take her out of the way, and certainly with no idea of finding pleasure in her society, I selected Enva; next to Leenoo the most malicious of the party, and gifted with sufficient intelligence to render her malice more effective than Leenoo's stupidity could be. Enva, moreover, with the vigorous youthful vitality—so often found on Earth in women of her light Northern complexion, seemed less likely to suffer from the severity of the weather or the fatigue of a land journey than most of her companions. When I spoke of my intention to Davilo, I was surprised to find that he considered even feminine company a protection.

“Any attempt upon you,” he said, “must either involve your companion, for which there can be no legal excuse preferred, or else expose the assailant to the risk of being identified through her evidence.”

I started accordingly a few days before the winter solstice of the North, reaching the great road a few miles from the point at which it crosses another of the great gulfs running due north and south, at its narrowest point in latitude 3° S. At this point the inlet is no more than twenty miles wide, and its banks about a hundred feet in height. At this level and across this vast space was carried a bridge, supported by arches, and resting on pillars deeply imbedded in the submarine rock at a depth about equal to the height of the land on either side. The Martial seas are for the most part shallow, the landlocked gulfs being seldom 100 fathoms, and the deepest ocean soundings giving less than 1000. The vast and solid structure looked as light and airy as any suspension bridge across an Alpine ravine. This gigantic viaduct, about 500 Martial years old, is still the most magnificent achievement of engineering in this department. The main roads, connecting important cities or forming the principal routes of commerce in the absence of convenient river or sea carriage, are carried over gulfs, streams, ravines, and valleys, and through

hills, as Terrestrial engineers have recently promised to carry railways over the minor inequalities of ground. That which we were following is an especially magnificent road, and signalised by several grand exhibitions of engineering daring and genius. It runs from Amacasfe for a thousand miles in one straight line direct as that of a Roman road, and with but half-a-dozen changes of level in the whole distance. It crossed in the space of a few miles a valley, or rather dell, 200 feet in depth, and with semi-perpendicular sides, and a stream wider than the Mississippi above the junction of the Ohio. Next it traversed the precipitous side of a hill for a distance of three or four miles, where Nature had not afforded foothold for a rabbit or a squirrel. The stupendous bridges and the magnificent open road cut in the side of the rock, its roof supported on the inside by the hill itself, on the outside by pillars left at regular intervals when the stone was cut, formed from one point a single splendid view. Pointing it out to Enva, I was a little surprised to find her capable, under the guidance of a few remarks from myself, of appreciating and taking pride in the marvellous work of her race. In another place, a tunnel pierced directly an intervening range of hills for about eight miles, interrupted only in two points by short deep open cuttings. This passage, unlike those on the river previously mentioned, was constantly and brilliantly lighted. The whole road indeed was lit up from the fall of the evening to the dispersion of the morning mist with a brilliancy nearly equal to that of daylight. As I dared not travel at a greater rate than twenty-five miles per hour—my experience, though it enabled me to manage the carriage with sufficient skill, not giving me confidence to push it to its greatest speed—the journey must occupy several days. We had, therefore, to rest at the stations provided by public authority for travellers undertaking such long land journeys. These are built like ordinary Martial houses, save that in lieu of peristyle or interior garden is an open square planted with shrubs and merely large enough to afford light to the inner rooms. The chambers also are very much smaller than those of good private houses. As these stations are nearly always placed in towns or villages, or in well-peopled country neighbourhoods, food is supplied by the nearest confectioner to each traveller individually, and a single person, assisted by the ambau, is able to manage the largest of them.

The last two or three days of our journey were bitterly cold, and not a little trying. My own undergarment of thick soft leather kept me warmer than the warmest greatcoat or cloak could have done, though I wore a large cloak of the kargynda's fur in addition—the prize of the hunt that had so nearly cost me dear, a personal and very gracious present from the Camptâ. My companion, who had not the former advantage, though wrapped in as many outer garments and quilts as I had thought necessary, felt the cold severely, and felt still more the dense chill mist which both by night and day covered the greater part of the country. This was not infrequently so thick as to render travelling almost perilous; and but that an electric light, required by law, was placed at each end of the carriage, collisions would have been inevitable. These hardships afforded another illustration of the subjection of the sex resulting from the rule of theoretical equality. More than a year's experience of natural kindness and consideration had not given Enva courage to make a single complaint; and at first she did her best to conceal the weeping which was the only, but almost continuous, expression of her suffering. She was almost as much surprised as gratified by my expressions of sympathy, and the trouble I took to obtain, at the first considerable town we reached, an apparatus by which the heat generated by motion itself was made to supply a certain warmth through the tubular open-work of the carriage to the persons of its occupants. The cold was as severe as that of a Swedish winter, though we never approached within seventeen degrees of the Arctic circle, a distance from the Pole equivalent to that of

Northern France. The Martial thermometer, in form more like a watch-barometer, which I carried in my belt, marked a cold equivalent to 12° below zero C. in the middle of the day; and when left in the carriage for the night it had registered no less than 22° below zero.

One of the Professors of the University received us as his guests, assigning to us, as is usual when a lady is of the party, rooms looking on the peristyle, but whose windows remained closed. Enva, of course, spent her time chiefly with the ladies of the family. When alone with me she talked freely, though needing some encouragement to express her own ideas, or report what she had heard; but she had no intention of concealment, perhaps no notion that I was interested in her accounts of the prevalent feeling respecting the heretics of whom she heard much, except of course that Eveena's father was among them. Through her I learned that much pains had been taken to intensify and excite into active hostility the dislike and distrust with which they had always been regarded by the public at large, and especially by the scientific guilds, whose members control all educational establishments. That some attempt against them was meditated appeared to be generally reported. Its nature and the movers in the matter were not known, so far as I could gather, even to men so influential as the chief Professors of the University. It was not merely that the women had heard nothing on this point, but that their lords had dropped expressions of surprise at the strictness with which the secret was kept.

As their parents pay, when first the children are admitted to the public Nurseries, the price of an average education, this special instruction is given in the first instance at the cost of the State to those who, on account of their taste and talent, are selected by the teachers of the Colleges. But before they leave the University a bond is taken for the amount of this outlay, which has to be repaid within three years. It is fair to say that the tax is trivial in comparison with the ordinary gains of their professions; the more so that no such preference as, in our world, is almost universally given to a reputation which can only be acquired by age, excludes the youth of Mars from full and profitable employment.

The youths were delighted to receive a lecture on the forms of Terrestrial government, and the outlines of their history; a topic I selected because they were already acquainted with the substance of the addresses elsewhere delivered. This afforded me an opportunity of making the personal acquaintance of some of the more distinguished pupils. The clearness of their intellect, the thoroughness of their knowledge in their several studies, and the distinctness of their acquaintance with the outlines and principles of Martial learning generally,—an acquaintance as free from smattering and superficiality as necessarily unembarrassed by detail,—testified emphatically to the excellence of the training they had received, as well as to the hereditary development of their brains. What was, however, not less striking was the utter absence at once of what I was accustomed to regard as moral principle, and of the generous impulses which in youth sometimes supply the place of principle. They avowed the most absolute selfishness, the most abject fear of death and pain, with a frankness that would have amazed the Cynics and disgusted the felons of almost any Earthly nation. There were partial exceptions, but these were to be found exclusively among those in training for what we should call public life, for administrative or judicial duties. These, though professing no devotion to the interest of others, and little that could be called public spirit, did nevertheless understand that in return for the high rank, the great power, and the liberal remuneration they would enjoy, they were bound to consider primarily the public interest in the performance of their functions—the right of society

to just or at least to carefully legal judgment, and diligent efficient administration. Their feeling, however, was rather professional than personal, the pride of students in the perfection of their art rather than the earnestness of men conscious of grave human responsibilities.

In conversing with the chief of this Faculty, I learned some peculiarities of the system of government with which I was not yet acquainted. Promotion never depends on those with whom a public servant comes into personal contact, but on those one or two steps above the latter. The judges, for instance, of the lower rank are selected by the principal judge of each dominion; these and their immediate assistants, by the Chief of the highest Court. The officers around and under the Governor of a province are named by the Regent of the dominion; those surrounding the Regent, as the Regent himself, by the Sovereign. Every officer, however, can be removed by his immediate superior; but it depends on the chief with whom his appointment rests, whether he shall be transferred to a similar post elsewhere or simply dismissed. Thus, while no man can be compelled to work with instruments he dislikes, no subordinate is at the mercy of personal caprice or antipathy.

Promotion, judicial and administrative, ends below the highest point. The judges of the Supreme Court are named by the Sovereign—with the advice of a Council, including the Regents, the judges of that Court, and the heads of the Philosophic and Educational Institutes—from among the advocates and students of law, or from among the ablest administrators who seem to possess judicial faculties. The code is written and simple. Every dubious point that arises in the course of litigation is referred, by appeal or directly by the judge who decides it, to the Chief Court, and all points of interpretation thus referred, are finally settled by an addition to the code at its periodical revision. The Sovereign can erase or add at pleasure to this code. But he can do so only in full Council, and must hear, though he need not regard, the opinions of his advisers. He can, however, suspend immediately till the next meeting of the Council the enforcement of any article.

The Regents are never named from among subordinate officials, nor is a Regent ever promoted to the throne. It is held that the qualities required in an absolute Sovereign are not such as are demanded from or likely to be developed in the subordinate ruler of a dominion however important, and that functions like those of a Regent, at least as important as those of the Viceroy of India, ought not to be entrusted to men trained in subaltern administrative duties. Among the youths of greatest promise, in their eighth year, a certain small number are selected by the chiefs of the University, who visit for this purpose all the Nurseries of the kingdom. With what purpose these youths are separated from their fellows is not explained to them. They are carefully educated for the highest public duties. Year by year those deemed fitter for less important offices are drafted off. There remain at last the very few who are thought competent to the functions of Regent or *Camptâ*, and from among these the Sovereign himself selects at pleasure his own successor and the occupant of any vacant Regency. The latter, however, holds his post at first on probation, and can, of course, be removed at any time by the Sovereign. If the latter should not before his death have named his own successor, the Council by a process of elimination is reduced to three, and these cast lots which shall name the new Autocrat from among the youths deemed worthy of the throne, of whom six are seldom living at the same time. No Prince is ever appointed under the age of fourteen (twenty-seven) or over that of sixteen (thirty). No *Camptâ*, has ever abdicated; but they seldom live to fall into that sort of inert indolence which may be

called the dotage of their race. The nature of their functions seems to preserve their mental activity longer than that of others; and probably they are not permitted to live when they have become manifestly unfit or incapable to reign.

When first invited to visit the University, I had hoped to make it only a stage and stepping-stone to something yet more interesting—to visit the Arctic hunters once more, and join them in the most exciting of their pursuits; a chase by the electric light of the great Amphibia of the frozen sea-belt immediately surrounding the permanent ice-cap of the Northern Pole. For this, however, the royal licence was required; and, as when I made a similar request during the fur-chase of the Southern season, I met with a peremptory refusal. “There are two men in this world,” said the Prince, “who would entertain such a wish. I dare not avow it; and if there were a third, he would assuredly be convicted of incurable lunacy, though on all other points he were as cold-blooded as the President of the Academy or the Vivisector-General.” I did not tell Eveena of my request till it had been refused; and if anything could have lessened my vexation at the loss of this third opportunity, it would have been the expression of her countenance at that moment. Indeed, I was then satisfied that I could not have left her in the fever of alarm and anxiety that any suspicion of my purpose would have caused.

I seized, however, the opportunity of a winter voyage in a small vessel, manned by four or five ocean-hunters, less timid and susceptible to surface disturbances than ordinary seamen. On such an excursion, Enva, though a far less pleasant companion, was a less anxious charge than Eveena. We made for the Northern coast, and ran for some hundred miles, along a sea-board not unlike that of Norway, but on a miniature scale. Though in some former age this hemisphere, like Europe, has been subject to glacial action much more general and intense than at present, its ice-seas and ice-rivers must always have been comparatively shallow and feeble. Beaching at last a break in the long line of cliff-guarded capes and fiords, where the sea, half covered with low islands, eats a broad and deep ingress into the land-belt, I disembarked, and made a day’s land journey to the northward.

The ground was covered with a sheet of hard-frozen snow about eighteen inches deep, with an upper surface of pure ice. For the ordinary carriage, here useless, was substituted a sledge, driven from behind by an instrument something between a paddle-wheel and a screw, worked, of course, by the usual electric machinery. The cold was far more intense than I had ever before known it; and the mist that fell at the close of the very short zyda of daylight rendered it all but intolerable. The Arctic circular thermometer fell to within a few points from its minimum of—50° Centigrade [?]. No flesh could endure exposure to such an atmosphere; and were not the inner mask and clothing of soft leather pervaded by a constant feeble current of electricity....

As we made our way back to the open sea, the temptation to disobey the royal order was all but irresistible. No fewer than three kargyndau were within shot at one and the same time; plunging from the shore of an icy island to emerge with their prey—a fish somewhat resembling the salmon in form and flavour. My companions, however, were terrified at the thought of disobedience to the law; and as we had but one mordyta (lightning-gun) among the party, and the uncertainty of the air-gun had been before proven to my cost, there was some force in their supplementary argument that, if I did not kill the kargynda, it was probable that the kargynda might board us; in which event our case would be summarily disposed of, without troubling the

Courts or allowing time to apply, even by telegraph, for the royal pardon. I was suggesting, more to the alarm than amusement of the crew, that we might close the hatches, and either carry the regal beast away captive, or, at worst, dive and drown him—for he cannot swim very far—when their objections were enforced in an unexpected manner. We were drifting beyond shot of the nearest brute, when the three suddenly plunged at once, and as if by concert, and when they rose, were all evidently making for the vessel, and within some eighty yards. I then learnt a new advantage of the electric machinery, as compared with the most powerful steam-engine. A pressure upon a button, and a few seconds sufficed to exchange a speed of four for one of twenty miles an hour; while, instead of sinking the vessel below the surface, the master directed the engine to pump out all the liquid ballast she contained. The waterspout thus sent forth half-drowned the enemy which had already come within a few yards of our starboard quarter, and effectually-scared the others. It was just as well that Enva, who heartily hated the bitter cold, was snugly ensconced in the warm cushions of the cabin, and had not, therefore, the opportunity of giving to Eveena, on our return, her version of an adventure whose alarming aspect would have impressed them both more than its ludicrous side. For half a minute I thought that I had, in sheer folly, exposed half a dozen lives to a peril none the less real and none the more satisfactory that, if five had been killed, the survivor could not have so told the story as to avoid laughing—or being laughed at.

Sweet and serene as was Eveena's smile of welcome, it could not conceal the traces of more than mere depression on her countenance. Heartily willing to administer an effective lesson to her tormentors, I seized the occasion of the sunset meal to notice the weary and harassed look she had failed wholly to banish.

“You look worse each time I return, Madonna. This time it is not merely my absence, if it ever were so. I will know who or what has driven and hunted you so.”

Taken thus by surprise, every face but one bore witness to the truth: Eveena's distress, Eunané's mixed relief and dismay, shared in yet greater degree by Velna, who knew less of me, the sheer terror and confusion of the rest, were equally significant. The Martial judge who said that “the best evidence was lost because colour could not be tested or blushes analysed,” would have passed sentence at once. But if Eivé's air of innocent unconsciousness and childish indifference were not sincere, it merited the proverbial praise of consummate affectation, “more golden than the sun and whiter than snow.” Eveena's momentary glance at once drew mine upon this “pet child,” but neither disturbed her. Nor did she overact her part. “Eivé,” said Enva one day, “never salts her tears or paints her blushes.” As soon as she caught my look of doubt—

“Have I done wrong?” she said, in a tone half of confidence, half of reproach. “Punish me, then, Clasfemta, as you please—with Eveena's sandal.”

The repartee delighted those who had reason to desire any diversion. The appeal to Eveena disarmed my unwilling and momentary distrust. Eveena, however, answered by neither word nor look, and the party presently broke up. Eivé crept close to claim some silent atonement for unspoken suspicion, and a few minutes had elapsed before, to the evident alarm of several conscious culprits, I sought Eveena in her own chamber.

In spite of all deprecation, I insisted on the explanation she had evaded in public. “I guess,” I said, “as much as you can tell me about ‘the four.’ I have borne too long with those who have made your life that of a hunted thorne, and rendered myself anxious and restless every day and hour that I have left you alone. Unless you will deny that they have done so—— Well, then, I will have peace for you and for myself. I cannot leave you to their mercy, nor can I remain at home for the next twelve dozen days, like a chained watch-dragon. Pass them over!” (as she strove to remonstrate); “there is something new this time. You have been harassed and frightened as well as unhappy.”

“Yes,” she admitted, “but I can give nothing like a reason. I dare not entreat you not to ask, and yet I am only like a child, that wakes screaming by night, and cannot say of what she is afraid. Ought she not to be whipped?”

“I can’t say, bambina; but I should not advise Eivé to startle you in that way! But, seriously, I suppose fear is most painful when it has no cause that can be removed. I have seen brave soldiers panic-stricken in the dark, without well knowing why.”

I watched her face as I spoke, and noted that while the pet name I had used in the first days of our marriage, now recalled by her image, elicited a faint smile, the mention of Eivé clouded it again. She was so unwilling to speak, that I caught at the clue afforded by her silence.

“It is Eivé then? The little hypocrite! She shall find your sandal heavier than mine.”

“No, no!” she pleaded eagerly. “You have seen what Eivé is in your presence; and to me she is always the same. If she were not, could I complain of her?”

“And why not, Eveena? Do you think I should hesitate between you?”

“No!” she answered, with unusual decision of tone. “I will tell you exactly what you would do. You would take my word implicitly; you would have made up your mind before you heard her; you would deal harder measure to Eivé than to any one, because she is your pet; you would think for once not of sparing the culprit, but of satisfying me; and afterwards”——

She paused, and I saw that she would not conclude in words a sentence

I could perhaps have finished for myself.

“I see,” I replied, “that Eivé is the source of your trouble, but not what the trouble is. For her sake, do not force me to extort the truth from her.”

“I doubt whether she has guessed my misgiving,” Eveena answered. “It may be that you are right—that it is because she was so long the only one you were fond of, that I cannot like and trust her as you do. But ... you leave the telegraph in my charge, understanding, of course, that it will be used as when you are at home. So, after Davilo’s warning, I have written their messages for Eunané and the others, but I could not refuse Eivé’s request to write her own, and, like you, I have never read them.”

“Why?” I asked. “Surely it is strange to give her, of all, a special privilege and confidence?”

Eveena was silent. She could in no case have reproached me in words, and even the reproach of silence was so unusual that I could not but feel it keenly. I saw at that moment that for whatever had happened or might happen I might thank myself; might thank the doubt I would not avow to my own mind, but could not conceal from her, that Eveena had condescended to something like jealousy of one whose childish simplicity, real or affected, had strangely won my heart, as children do win hearts hardened by experience of life’s roughness and evil.

“I know nothing,” Eveena said at last: “yet somehow, and wholly without any reason I can explain, I fear. Eivé, you may remember, has, as your companion, made acquaintance with many households whose heads you do not believe friends to you or the Zinta. She is a diligent correspondent. She never affects to conceal anything, and yet no one of us has lately seen the contents of a note sent or received by her.”

There was nothing tangible in Eveena’s suspicion. It was most repugnant to my own feelings, and yet it implanted, whether by force of sympathy or of instinct, a misgiving that never left me again.

“My own,” I answered, “I would trust your judgment, your observation or feminine instinct and insight into character, far sooner than my own conclusions upon solid facts. But instincts and presentiments, though we are not scientifically ignorant enough to disregard them, are not evidence on which we can act or even inquire.”

“No,” she said. “And yet it is hard to feel, as I cannot help feeling, that the thunder-cloud is forming, that the bolt is almost ready to strike, and that you are risking life, and perhaps more than life, out of a delicacy no other man would show towards a child—since child you will have her—who, I feel sure, deserves all she might receive from the hands of one who would have the truth at any cost.”

“You feel,” I answered, “for me as I should feel for you. But is death so terrible to us? It means leaving you—I wish we knew that it does not mean losing for ever, after so brief an enjoyment, all that is perishable in love like ours—or it would not be worth fearing. I don’t think I ever did fear it till you made my life so sweet. But life is not worth an unkindness or injustice. Better die trusting to the last than live in the misery and shame of suspecting one I love, or dreading treacherous malice from any hand under my own roof.”

When I met Davilo the next morning, the grave and anxious expression of his face—usually calm and serene even in deepest thought, as are those of the experienced members of an Order confident in the consciousness of irresistible secret power—not a little disturbed me. As Eveena had said, the thunder-cloud was forming; and a chill went to my heart which in facing measurable and open peril it had never felt.

“I bring you,” he said; “a message that will not, I am afraid, be welcome. He whose guest you were at Serocasfe invites you to pay him an immediate visit; and the invitation must be accepted

at once.”

I drew myself up with no little indignation at the imperative tone, but feeling at least equal awe at the stern calmness with which the mandate was spoken.

“And what compels me to such haste, or to compliance without consideration?”

“That power,” he returned, “which none can resist, and to which you may not demur.”

Seeing that I still hesitated—in truth, the summons had turned my vague misgiving into intense though equally vague alarm and even terror, which as unmanly and unworthy I strove to repress, but which asserted its domination in a manner as unwonted as unwelcome—he drew aside a fold of his robe, and showed within the silver Star of the Order, supported by the golden sash, that marked a rank second only to that of the wearer of the Signet itself. I understood too well by this time, through conversations with him and other communications of which it has been needless to speak, the significance of this revelation. I knew the impossibility of questioning the authority to which I had pledged obedience. I realised with great amazement the fact that a secondary position on my own estate, and a personal charge of my own safety, had been accepted by a Chief of the Zinta.

“There is, of course,” I replied at last, “no answer to a mandate so enforced. But, Chief, reluctant as I am to say it, I fear—fear as I have never done before; and yet fear I cannot say, I cannot guess what.”

“There is no cause for alarm,” he said somewhat contemptuously. “In this journey, sudden, speedy, and made under our guard as on our summons, there is little or none of that peril which has beset you so long.”

“You forget, Chief,” I rejoined, “that you speak to a soldier, whose chosen trade was to risk life at the word of a superior; to one whose youth thought no smile so bright as that of naked steel, and had often ‘kissed the lips of the lightning’ ere the down darkened his own. At any rate, you have told me daily for more than a year that I am living under constant peril of assassination; have I seemed to quail thereat? If, then, I am now terrified for the first time, that which I dread, without knowing or dreaming what it is, is assuredly a peril worse than any I have known, the shadow of a calamity against which I have neither weapon nor courage. It cannot be for myself that I am thus appalled,” I continued, the thought flashing into my mind as I spoke it, “and there is but one whose life is so closely bound with mine that danger to her should bring such terror as this. I go at your bidding, but I will not go alone.”

He paused for some time, apparently in perplexity, certainly in deep thought, before he replied.

“As you will. One thing more. The slips of tafroo with which you furnished me have been under the eyes of which you have heard. This” (handing me the one that bore no mark) “has passed, so far as the highest powers of the sense that is not of the body can perceive, through none but innocent hands. The hand from which you received this” (the marked slip) “is spotted with treason, and may to-morrow be red.”

I was less impressed by this declaration than probably would have been any other member of the Order. I had seen on Earth the most marvellous perceptions of a perfectly lucid vision succeeded, sometimes within the space of the same day, by dreams or hallucinations the most absolutely deceptive. I felt, therefore, more satisfaction in the acquittal of Eunané, whom I had never doubted, than trouble at the grave suspicion suggested against Eivé—a suspicion I still refused to entertain.

“You should enter your balloon as soon as the sunset mist will conceal it,” said Davilo. “By mid-day you may reach the deep bay on the mid sea-belt of the North, where a swift vessel will meet you and convey you in two or three days by a direct course through the canal and gulf you have traversed already, to the port from which you commenced your first submarine voyage.”

“You had better,” I said, “make your instruction a little more particular, or I shall hardly know how to direct my course.”

“Do not dream,” he answered, “that you will be permitted to undertake such a journey but under the safest guidance. At the time I have named all will be ready for your departure, and you have simply to sleep or read or meditate as you will, till you reach your destination.”

Eveena was not a little startled when I informed her of the sudden journey before me, and my determination that she should be my companion. It was unquestionably a trying effort for her, especially the balloon voyage, which would expose her to the cold of the mists and of the night, and I feared to the intenser cold of the upper air. But I dared not leave her, and she was pleased by a peremptory decision which made her the companion of my absence, without leaving room for discussion or question. The time for our departure was drawing near when, followed by Eunané, she came into my chamber.

“If we are to be long away,” she said, “you must say on whom my charges are to devolve.”

“As you please,” I answered, sure of her choice, and well content to see her hand over her cares to Eunané, who, if she lacked the wisdom and forbearance of Eveena, could certainly hold the reins with a stronger hand.

“Eivé,” she said, “has asked the charge of my flowerbed; but I had promised it, and”——

“And you would rather give it,” I answered, “to Eunané? Naturally; and I should not care to allow Eivé the chance of spoiling your work. I think we may now trust whatever is yours in those once troublesome hands,” looking at Eunané, “with perfect assurance that they will do their best.”

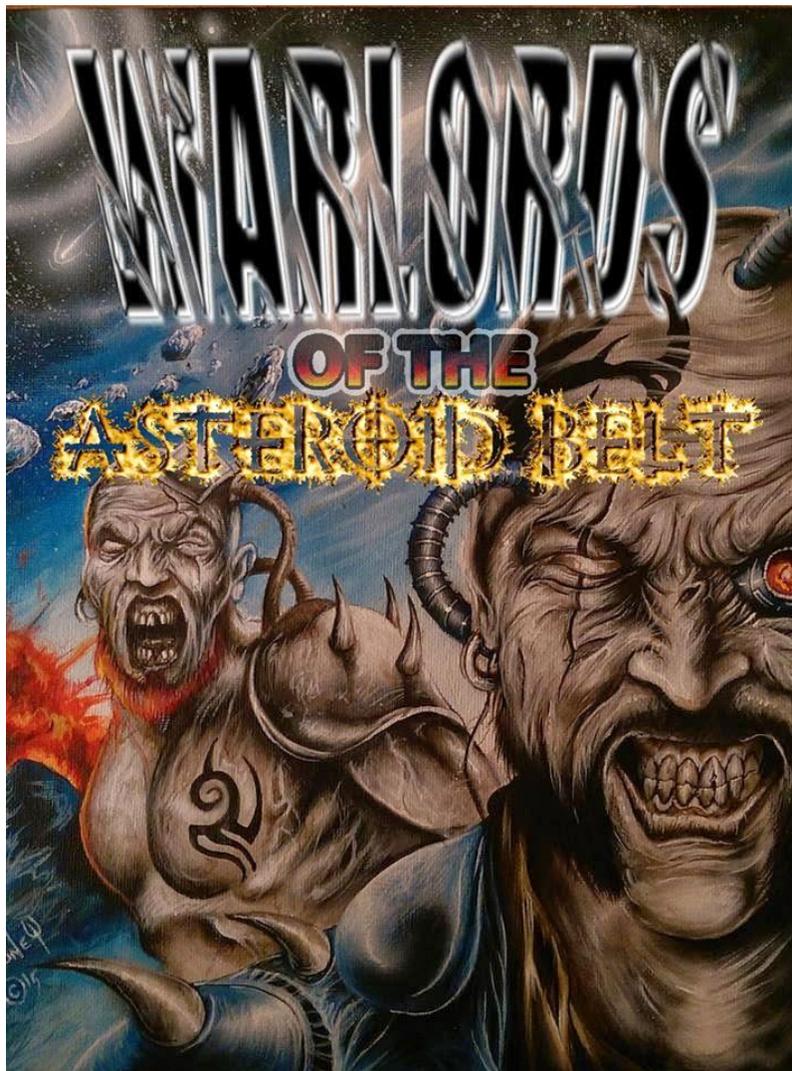
I had never before parted even from Eunané with any feeling of regret; but on this occasion an impulse I could not account for, but have ever since been glad to remember, made me turn at the last moment and add to Eveena’s earnest embrace a few words of affection and confidence, which evidently cheered and encouraged her deputy. The car that awaited us was of the light tubular construction common here, formed of the silvery metal zorinta. About eighteen feet in

length and half that breadth, it was divided into two compartments; each, with the aid of canopy and curtains, forming at will a closed tent, and securing almost as much privacy as an Arab family enjoys, or opening to the sky. In that with which the sails and machinery were connected were Davilo and two of his attendants. The other had been carefully lined and covered with furs and wrappings, indicating an attention to my companion which indeed is rarely shown to women by their own lords, and which none but the daughter of Esmo would have received even among the brethren of the Order. Ere we departed I had arranged her cushions and wrapped her closely in the warmest coverings; and flinging over her at last the kargynda skin received from the Campâtâ, I bade her sleep if possible during our aerial voyage. There was need to provide as carefully as possible for her comfort. The balloon shot up at once above the evening mists to a height at which the cold was intense, but at which our voyage could be guided by the stars, invisible from below, and at which we escaped the more dangerously chilling damp. The wind that blew right in our teeth, caused by no atmospheric current but by our own rapid passage, would in a few moments have frozen my face, perhaps fatally, had not thick skins been arranged to screen us. Even through these it blew with intense severity, and I was glad indeed to cover myself from head to foot and lie down beside Eveena. Her hand as she laid it on mine was painfully cold; but the shivering I could hardly suppress made her anxious to part in my favour with some at least of the many coverings that could hardly screen herself from the searching blast. Not at the greatest height I reached among the Himalayas, nor on the Steppes of Tartary, had I experienced a cold severer than this. The Sun had just turned westward when we reached the port at which we were to embark. Despite the cold, Eveena had slept during the latter part of our voyage, and was still sleeping when I placed her on the cushions in our cabin. The sudden and most welcome change from bitter cold to comfortable warmth awakened her, as it at last allowed me to sleep. Our journey was continued below the surface at a rate of more than twelve hundred miles in the day, a speed which made observation through the thick but perfectly transparent side windows of our cabin impossible. I was indisposed for meditation, which could have been directed to no other subject than the mysterious purpose of our journey, and had not provided myself with books. But in Eveena's company it was impossible that the time should pass slowly or wearily.

In this balloon journey I had a specially advantageous opportunity of observing the two moons—velnaa, as they are called. Cavelna, or Caulna, the nearer, in diameter about 8' or a little more than one-fourth that of our Moon, is a tolerably brilliant object, about 5000 miles from the surface. Moving, like all planets and satellites, from west to east, it completes its stellar revolution and its phases in less than seven and a half hours; the contrary revolution of the skies prolongs its circuit around the planet to a period of ten hours. Zeelna (Zevelna) returns to the same celestial meridian in thirty hours; but as in this time the starry vault has completed about a rotation and a quarter in the opposite direction, it takes nearly five days to reappear on the same horizon. It is about 3' in diameter, and about 12,000 miles from the surface. The result of the combined motions is that the two moons, to the eye, seem to move in opposite directions. When we rose above the mists, Caulna was visible as a very fine crescent in the west; Zeelna was rising in the east, and almost full; but hardly a more brilliant object than Venus when seen to most advantage from Earth. Both moved so rapidly among the stars that their celestial change of place was apparent from minute to minute. But, as regarded our own position, the appearance was as opposite as their direction. Zeelna, traversing in twelve hours only one-fifth of the visible hemisphere, while crossing in the same time 144° on the zodiac—twelve degrees per hour, or our

Moon's diameter in two minutes and a half—was left behind by the stars; and fixing what I may call the ocular attention on her, she seemed to stand still while they slowly passed her; thus making their revolution perceptible to sense as it never is on Earth, for lack of a similar standard. Caulna, rising in the west and moving eastwards, crossed the visible sky in five hours, and passed through the stars at the rate of 48° per hour, so that she seemed to sail past them like a golden cloudlet or celestial vessel driven by a slow wind. It happened this night that she passed over the star Fomalhaut—an occultation which I watched with great interest through an excellent field-glass, but which lasted only for about half a minute. About an hour before midnight the two moons passed each other in the Eastern sky; both gibbous at the moment, like our Moon in her last quarter. The difference in size and motion was then most striking; Caulna seeming to rush past her companion, and the latter looking like a stationary star in the slowly moving sky.

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THE BATTLE OF DORKING by GT Chesney

Part Three

All this time we were lying there to be fired at without returning a shot, for our skirmishers were holding the line of walls and enclosures below. However, the bank protected most of us, and the brigadier now ordered our right company, which was in the open, to get behind it also; and there we lay about four deep, the shells crashing and bullets whistling over our heads, but hardly a man being touched. Our colonel was, indeed, the only one exposed, for he rode up and down the lane at a footpace as steady as a rock; but he made the major and adjutant dismount, and take shelter behind the hedge, holding their horses. We were all pleased to see him so cool, and it restored our confidence in him, which had been shaken yesterday.

The time seemed interminable while we lay thus inactive. We could not, of course, help peering over the bank to try and see what was going on; but there was nothing to be made out, for now a tremendous thunderstorm, which had been gathering all day, burst on us, and a torrent of almost blinding rain came down, which obscured the view even more than the smoke, while the crashing of the thunder and the glare of the lightning could be heard and seen even above the roar and flashing of the artillery. Once the mist lifted, and I saw for a minute an attack on Box Hill, on the other side of the gap on our left. It was like the scene at a theatre—a curtain of smoke all round and a clear gap in the centre, with a sudden gleam of evening sunshine lighting it up. The steep smooth slope of the hill was crowded with the dark-blue figures of the enemy, whom I now saw for the first time—an irregular outline in front, but very solid in rear: the whole body was moving forward by fits and starts, the men firing and advancing, the officers waving their swords, the columns closing up and gradually making way. Our people were almost concealed by the bushes at the top, whence the smoke and their fire could be seen proceeding: presently from these bushes on the crest came out a red line, and dashed down the brow of the hill, a flame of fire belching out from the front as it advanced. The enemy hesitated, gave way, and finally ran back in a confused crowd down the hill. Then the mist covered the scene, but the glimpse of this splendid charge was inspiring, and I hoped we should show the same coolness when it came to our turn. It was about this time that our skirmishers fell back, a good many wounded, some limping along by themselves, others helped. The main body retired in very fair order, halting to turn round and fire; we could see a mounted officer of the Guards riding up and down encouraging them to be steady. Now came our turn. For a few minutes we saw nothing, but a rattle of bullets came through the rain and mist, mostly, however, passing over the bank. We began to fire in reply, stepping up against the bank to fire, and stooping down to load; but our brigade-major rode up with an order, and the word was passed through the men to reserve our fire. In a very few moments it must have been that, when ordered to stand up, we could see the helmet—spikes and then the figures of the skirmishers as they came on: a lot of them there appeared to be, five or six deep I should say, but in loose order, each man stopping to aim and fire, and then coming forward a little. Just then the brigadier clattered on horseback up the lane. “Now, then, gentlemen, give it them hot!” he cried; and fire away we did, as fast as ever we were able. A perfect storm of bullets seemed to be flying about us too, and I thought each moment must be the last; escape seemed impossible, but I saw no one fall, for I was too busy, and so were we all, to look to the right or left, but loaded and fired as fast as we could. How long this went on I know not—it could not have been long; neither side could have lasted many minutes under

such a fire, but it ended by the enemy gradually falling back, and as soon as we saw this we raised a tremendous shout, and some of us jumped up on the bank to give them our parting shots. Suddenly the order was passed down the line to cease firing, and we soon discovered the cause; a battalion of the Guards was charging obliquely across from our left across our front. It was, I expect, their flank attack as much as our fire which had turned back the enemy; and it was a splendid sight to see their steady line as they advanced slowly across the smooth lawn below us, firing as they went, but as steady as if on parade. We felt a great elation at this moment; it seemed as if the battle was won. Just then somebody called out to look to the wounded, and for the first time I turned to glance down the rank along the lane. Then I saw that we had not beaten back the attack without loss. Immediately before me lay Bob Lawford of my office, dead on his back from a bullet through his forehead, his hand still grasping his rifle. At every step was some friend or acquaintance killed or wounded, and a few paces down the lane I found Travers, sitting with his back against the bank. A ball had gone through his lungs, and blood was coming from his mouth. I was lifting him up, but the cry of agony he gave stopped me. I then saw that this was not his only wound; his thigh was smashed by a bullet (which must have hit him when standing on the bank), and the blood streaming down mixed in a muddy puddle with the rain-water under him. Still he could not be left here, so, lifting him up as well as I could, I carried him through the gate which led out of the lane at the back to where our camp hospital was in the rear. The movement must have caused him awful agony, for I could not support the broken thigh, and he could not restrain his groans, brave fellow though he was; but how I carried him at all I cannot make out, for he was a much bigger man than myself; but I had not gone far, one of a stream of our fellows, all on the same errand, when a bandsman and Wood met me, bringing a hurdle as a stretcher, and on this we placed him. Wood had just time to tell me that he had got a cart down in the hollow, and would endeavour to take off his master at once to Kingston, when a staff-officer rode up to call us to the ranks. "You really must not straggle in this way, gentlemen," he said; "pray keep your ranks." "But we can't leave our wounded to be trodden down and die," cried one of our fellows. "Beat off the enemy first, sir," he replied. "Gentlemen, do, pray, join your regiments, or we shall be a regular mob." And no doubt he did not speak too soon; for besides our fellows straggling to the rear, lots of volunteers from the regiments in reserve were running forward to help, till the whole ground was dotted with groups of men. I hastened back to my post, but I had just time to notice that all the ground in our rear was occupied by a thick mass of troops, much more numerous than in the morning, and a column was moving down to the left of our line, to the ground before held by the Guards. All this time, although the musketry had slackened, the artillery-fire seemed heavier than ever; the shells screamed overhead or burst around; and I confess to feeling quite a relief at getting back to the friendly shelter of the lane. Looking over the bank, I noticed for the first time the frightful execution our fire had created. The space in front was thickly strewn with dead and badly wounded, and beyond the bodies of the fallen enemy could just be seen—for it was now getting dusk—the bear-skins and red coats of our own gallant Guards scattered over the slope, and marking the line of their victorious advance. But hardly a minute could have passed in thus looking over the field, when our brigademajor came moving up the lane on foot (I suppose his horse had been shot), crying, "Stand to your arms, volunteers! they're coming on again;" and we found ourselves a second time engaged in a hot musketry-fire. How long it went on I cannot now remember, but we could distinguish clearly the thick line of skirmishers, about sixty paces off, and mounted officers among them; and we seemed to be keeping them well in check, for they were quite exposed to our fire, while we were protected nearly up to our shoulders, when—I know not how—I became sensible that

something had gone wrong. "We are taken in flank!" called out some one; and looking along the left, sure enough there were dark figures jumping over the bank into the lane and firing up along our line. The volunteers in reserve, who had come down to take the place of the Guards, must have given way at this point; the enemy's skirmishers had got through our line, and turned our left flank. How the next move came about I cannot recollect, or whether it was without orders, but in a short time we found ourselves out of the lane, and drawn up in a straggling line about thirty yards in rear of it—at our end, that is, the other flank had fallen back a good deal more—and the enemy were lining the hedge, and numbers of them passing over and forming up on our side. Beyond our left a confused mass were retreating, firing as they went, followed by the advancing line of the enemy. We stood in this way for a short space, firing at random as fast as we could. Our colonel and major must have been shot, for there was no one to give an order, when somebody on horseback called out from behind—I think it must have been the brigadier—"Now, then, volunteers! give a British, cheer, and go at them—charge!" and, with a shout, we rushed at the enemy. Some of them ran, some stopped to meet us, and for a moment it was a real hand-to-hand fight. I felt a sharp sting in my leg, as I drove my bayonet right through the man in front of me. I confess I shut my eyes, for I just got a glimpse of the poor wretch as he fell back, his eyes starting out of his head, and, savage though we were, the sight was almost too horrible to look at. But the struggle was over in a second, and we had cleared the ground again right up to the rear hedge of the lane. Had we gone on, I believe we might have recovered the lane too, but we were now all out of order; there was no one to say what to do; the enemy began to line the hedge and open fire, and they were streaming past our left; and how it came about I know not, but we found ourselves falling back towards our right rear, scarce any semblance of a line remaining, and the volunteers who had given way on our left mixed up with us, and adding to the confusion. It was now nearly dark. On the slopes which we were retreating to was a large mass of reserves drawn up in columns. Some of the leading files of these, mistaking us for the enemy, began firing at us; our fellows, crying out to them to stop, ran towards their ranks, and in a few moments the whole slope of the hill became a scene of confusion that I cannot attempt to describe, regiments and detachments mixed up in hopeless disorder. Most of us, I believe, turned towards the enemy and fired away our few remaining cartridges; but it was too late to take aim, fortunately for us, or the guns which the enemy had brought up through the gap, and were firing point-blank, would have done more damage. As it was, we could see little more than the bright flashes of their fire. In our confusion we had jammed up a line regiment immediately behind us, which I suppose had just arrived on the field, and its colonel and some staff-officers were in vain trying to make a passage for it, and their shouts to us to march to the rear and clear a road could be heard above the roar of the guns and the confused babel of sound. At last a mounted officer pushed his way through, followed by a company in sections, the men brushing past with firm-set faces, as if on a desperate task; and the battalion, when it got clear, appeared to deploy and advance down the slope. I have also a dim recollection of seeing the Life Guards trot past the front, and push on towards the town—a last desperate attempt to save the day—before we left the field. Our adjutant, who had got separated from our flank of the regiment in the confusion, now came up, and managed to lead us, or at any rate some of us, up to the crest of the hill in the rear, to re-form, as he said; but there we met a vast crowd of volunteers, militia, and waggons, all hurrying rearward from the direction of the big house, and we were borne in the stream for a mile at least before it was possible to stop. At last the adjutant led us to an open space a little off the line of fugitives, and there we re-formed the remains of the companies. Telling us to halt, he rode off to try and obtain orders, and find out where the rest of our brigade was. From this point,

a spur of high ground running off from the main plateau, we looked down through the dim twilight into the battle-field below. Artillery-fire was still going on. We could see the flashes from the guns on both sides, and now and then a stray shell came screaming up and burst near us, but we were beyond the sound of musketry. This halt first gave us time to think about what had happened. The long day of expectancy had been succeeded by the excitement of battle; and when each minute may be your last, you do not think much about other people, nor when you are facing another man with a rifle have you time to consider whether he or you are the invader, or that you are fighting for your home and hearths. All fighting is pretty much alike, I suspect, as to sentiment, when once it begins. But now we had time for reflection; and although we did not yet quite understand how far the day had gone against us, an uneasy feeling of self-condemnation must have come up in the minds of most of us; while, above all, we now began to realise what the loss of this battle meant to the country. Then, too, we knew not what had become of all our wounded comrades. Reaction, too, set in after the fatigue and excitement. For myself, I had found out for the first time that beside the bayonet-wound in my leg, a bullet had gone through my left arm, just below the shoulder, and outside the bone. I remember feeling something like a blow just when we lost the lane, but the wound passed unnoticed till now, when the bleeding had stopped and the shirt was sticking to the wound.

This half-hour seemed an age, and while we stood on this knoll the endless tramp of men and rumbling of carts along the downs besides us told their own tale. The whole army was falling back. At last we could discern the adjutant riding up to us out of the dark. The army was to retreat and take up a position on Epsom Downs, he said; we should join in the march, and try and find our brigade in the morning; and so we turned into the throng again, and made our way on as best we could. A few scraps of news he gave us as he rode alongside of our leading section; the army had held its position well for a time, but the enemy had at last broken through the line between us and Guildford, as well as in our front, and had poured his men through the point gained, throwing the line into confusion, and the first army corps near Guildford were also falling back to avoid being outflanked. The regular troops were holding the rear; we were to push on as fast as possible to get out of their way, and allow them to make an orderly retreat in the morning. The gallant old lord commanding our corps had been badly wounded early in the day, he heard, and carried off the field. The Guards had suffered dreadfully; the household cavalry had ridden down the cuirassiers, but had got into broken ground and been awfully cut up. Such were the scraps of news passed down our weary column. What had become of our wounded no one knew, and no one liked to ask. So we trudged on. It must have been midnight when we reached Leatherhead. Here we left the open ground and took to the road, and the block became greater. We pushed our way painfully along; several trains passed slowly ahead along the railway by the roadside, containing the wounded, we supposed—such of them, at least, as were lucky enough to be picked up. It was daylight when we got to Epsom. The night had been bright and clear after the storm, with a cool air, which, blowing through my soaking clothes, chilled me to the bone. My wounded leg was stiff and sore, and I was ready to drop with exhaustion and hunger. Nor were my comrades in much better case; we had eaten nothing since breakfast the day before, and the bread we had put by had been washed away by the storm: only a little pulp remained at the bottom of my bag. The tobacco was all too wet to smoke. In this plight we were creeping along, when the adjutant guided us into a field by the roadside to rest awhile, and we lay down exhausted on the sloppy grass. The roll was here taken, and only 180 answered out of nearly 500 present on the morning of the battle. How many of these were killed and wounded no

one could tell; but it was certain many must have got separated in the confusion of the evening. While resting here, we saw pass by, in the crowd of vehicles and men, a cart laden with commissariat stores, driven by a man in uniform. "Food!" cried some one, and a dozen volunteers jumped up and surrounded the cart. The driver tried to whip them off; but he was pulled off his seat, and the contents of the cart thrown out in an instant. They were preserved meats in tins, which we tore open with our bayonets. The meat had been cooked before, I think; at any rate we devoured it. Shortly after this a general came by with three or four staff-officers. He stopped and spoke to our adjutant, and then rode into the field. "My lads," said he, "you shall join my division for the present: fall in, and follow the regiment that is now passing." We rose up, fell in by companies, each about twenty strong, and turned once more into the stream moving along the road;—regiments' detachments, single volunteers or militiamen, country people making off, some with bundles, some without, a few in carts, but most on foot; here and there waggons of stores, with men sitting wherever there was room, others crammed with wounded soldiers. Many blocks occurred from horses falling, or carts breaking down and filing up the road. In the town the confusion was even worse, for all the houses seemed full of volunteers and militiamen, wounded or resting, or trying to find food, and the streets were almost choked up. Some officers were in vain trying to restore order, but the task seemed a hopeless one. One or two volunteer regiments which had arrived from the north the previous night, and had been halted here for orders, were drawn up along the roadside steadily enough, and some of the retreating regiments, including ours, may have preserved the semblance of discipline, but for the most part the mass pushing to the rear was a mere mob. The regulars, or what remained of them, were now, I believe, all in the rear, to hold the advancing enemy in check. A few officers among such a crowd could do nothing. To add to the confusion, several houses were being emptied of the wounded brought here the night before, to prevent their falling into the hands of the enemy, some in carts, some being carried to the railway by men. The groans of these poor fellows as they were jostled through the street went to our hearts, selfish though fatigue and suffering had made us. At last, following the guidance of a staff-officer who was standing to show the way, we turned off from the main London road and took that towards Kingston. Here the crush was less, and we managed to move along pretty steadily. The air had been cooled by the storm, and there was no dust. We passed through a village where our new general had seized all the public-houses, and taken possession of the liquor; and each regiment as it came up was halted, and each man got a drink of beer, served out by companies. Whether the owner got paid, I know not, but it was like nectar. It must have been about one o'clock in the afternoon that we came in sight of Kingston. We had been on our legs sixteen hours, and had got over about twelve miles of ground. There is a hill a little south of the Surbiton station, covered then mostly with villas, but open at the western extremity, where there was a clump of trees on the summit. We had diverged from the road towards this, and here the general halted us and disposed the line of the division along his front, facing to the south-west, the right of the line reaching down to the water-works on the Thames, the left extending along the southern slope of the hill, in the direction of the Epsom road by which we had come. We were nearly in the centre, occupying the knoll just in front of the general, who dismounted on the top and tied his horse to a tree. It is not much of a hill, but commands an extensive view over the flat country around; and as we lay wearily on the ground we could see the Thames glistening like a silver field in the bright sunshine, the palace at Hampton Court, the bridge at Kingston, and the old church tower rising above the haze of the town, with the woods of Richmond Park behind it. To most of us the scene could not but call up the associations of happy days of peace—days now ended and peace destroyed through national

infatuation. We did not say this to each other, but a deep depression had come upon us, partly due to weakness and fatigue, no doubt, but we saw that another stand was going to be made, and we had no longer any confidence in ourselves. If we could not hold our own when stationary in line, on a good position, but had been broken up into a rabble at the first shock, what chance had we now of manoeuvring against a victorious enemy in this open ground? A feeling of desperation came over us, a determination to struggle on against hope; but anxiety for the future of the country, and our friends, and all dear to us, filled our thoughts now that we had time for reflection. We had had no news of any kind since Wood joined us the day before—we knew not what was doing in London, or what the Government was about, or anything else; and exhausted though we were, we felt an intense craving to know what was happening in other parts of the country.

Our general had expected to find a supply of food and ammunition here, but nothing turned up. Most of us had hardly a cartridge left, so he ordered the regiment next to us, which came from the north and had not been engaged, to give us enough to make up twenty rounds a man, and he sent off a fatigue-party to Kingston to try and get provisions, while a detachment of our fellows was allowed to go foraging among the villas in our rear; and in about an hour they brought back some bread and meat, which gave us a slender meal all round. They said most of the houses were empty, and that many had been stripped of all eatables, and a good deal damaged already.

It must have been between three and four o'clock when the sound of cannonading began to be heard in the front, and we could see the smoke of the guns rising above the woods of Esher and Claremont, and soon afterwards some troops emerged from the fields below us. It was the rear-guard of regular troops. There were some guns also, which were driven up the slope and took up their position round the knoll. There were three batteries, but they only counted eight guns amongst them. Behind them was posted the line; it was a brigade apparently of four regiments, but the whole did not look to be more than eight or nine hundred men. Our regiment and another had been moved a little to the rear to make way for them, and presently we were ordered down to occupy the railway station on our right rear. My leg was now so stiff I could no longer march with the rest, and my left arm was very swollen and sore, and almost useless; but anything seemed better than being left behind, so I limped after the battalion as best I could down to the station. There was a goods shed a little in advance of it down the line, a strong brick building, and here my company was posted. The rest of our men lined the wall of the enclosure. A staff-officer came with us to arrange the distribution; we should be supported by line troops, he said; and in few minutes a train full of them came slowly up from Guildford way. It was the last; the men got out, the train passed on, and a party began to tear up the rails, while the rest were distributed among the houses on each side. A sergeant's party joined us in our shed, and an engineer officer with sappers came to knock holes in the walls for us to fire from; but there were only half-a-dozen of them, so progress was not rapid, and as we had no tools we could not help.

It was while we were watching this job that the adjutant, who was as active as ever, looked in, and told us to muster in the yard. The fatigue-party had come back from Kingston, and a small baker's hand-cart of food was made over to us as our share. It contained loaves, flour, and some joints of meat. The meat and the flour we had not time or means to cook. The loaves we devoured; and there was a tap of water in the yard, so we felt refreshed by the meal. I should have liked to wash my wounds, which were becoming very offensive, but I dared not take off my

coat, feeling sure I should not be able to get it on again. It was while we were eating our bread that the rumour first reached us of another disaster, even greater than that we had witnessed ourselves. Whence it came I know not; but a whisper went down the ranks that Woolwich had been captured. We all knew that it was our only arsenal, and understood the significance of the blow. No hope, if this were true, of saving the country. Thinking over this, we went back to the shed.

Although this was only our second day of war, I think we were already old soldiers so far that we had come to be careless about fire, and the shot and shell that now began to open on us made no sensation. We felt, indeed, our need of discipline, and we saw plainly enough the slender chance of success coming out of troops so imperfectly trained as we were; but I think we were all determined to fight on as long as we could. Our gallant adjutant gave his spirit to everybody; and the staff-officer commanding was a very cheery fellow, and went about as if we were certain of victory. Just as the firing began he looked in to say that we were as safe as in a church, that we must be sure and pepper the enemy well, and that more cartridges would soon arrive. There were some steps and benches in the shed, and on these a part of our men were standing, to fire through the upper loop-holes, while the line soldiers and others stood on the ground, guarding the second row. I sat on the floor, for I could not now use my rifle, and besides, there were more men than loop-holes. The artillery fire which had opened now on our position was from a longish range; and occupation for the riflemen had hardly begun when there was a crash in the shed, and I was knocked down by a blow on the head. I was almost stunned for a time, and could not make out at first what had happened. A shot or shell had hit the shed without quite penetrating the wall, but the blow had upset the steps resting against it, and the men standing on them, bringing down a cloud of plaster and brickbats, one of which had struck me. I felt now past being of use. I could not use my rifle, and could barely stand; and after a time I thought I would make for my own house, on the chance of finding some one still there. I got up therefore, and staggered homewards. Musketry fire had now commenced, and our side were blazing away from the windows of the houses, and from behind walls, and from the shelter of some trucks still standing in the station. A couple of field-pieces in the yard were firing, and in the open space in rear of the station a reserve was drawn up. There, too, was the staff-officer on horseback, watching the fight through his field-glass. I remember having still enough sense to feel that the position was a hopeless one. That straggling line of houses and gardens would surely be broken through at some point, and then the line must give way like a rope of sand. It was about a mile to our house, and I was thinking how I could possibly drag myself so far when I suddenly recollected that I was passing Travers's house,—one of the first of a row of villas then leading from the Surbiton station to Kingston. Had he been brought home, I wonder, as his faithful old servant promised, and was his wife still here? I remember to this day the sensation of shame I felt, when I recollected that I had not once given him—my greatest friend—a thought since I carried him off the field the day before. But war and suffering make men selfish. I would go in now at any rate and rest awhile, and see if I could be of use. The little garden before the house was as trim as ever—I used to pass it every day on my way to the train, and knew every shrub in it—and ablaze with flowers, but the hall-door stood ajar. I stepped in and saw little Arthur standing in the hall. He had been dressed as neatly as ever that day, and as he stood there in his pretty blue frock and white trousers and socks showing his chubby little legs, with his golden locks, fair face, and large dark eyes, the picture of childish beauty, in the quiet hall, just as it used to look—the vases of flowers, the hat and coats hanging up, the familiar pictures on the walls—this vision of peace

in the midst of war made me wonder for a moment, faint and giddy as I was, if the pandemonium outside had any real existence, and was not merely a hideous dream. But the roar of the guns making the house shake, and the rushing of the shot, gave a ready answer. The little fellow appeared almost unconscious of the scene around him, and was walking up the stairs holding by the railing, one step at a time, as I had seen him do a hundred times before, but turned round as I came in. My appearance frightened him, and staggering as I did into the hall, my face and clothes covered with blood and dirt, I must have looked an awful object to the child, for he gave a cry and turned to run toward the basement stairs. But he stopped on hearing my voice calling him back to his god-papa, and after a while came timidly up to me. Papa had been to the battle, he said, and was very ill: mamma was with papa: Wood was out: Lucy was in the cellar, and had taken him there, but he wanted to go to mamma. Telling him to stay in the hall for a minute till I called him, I climbed up-stairs and opened the bedroom-door. My poor friend lay there, his body resting on the bed, his head supported on his wife's shoulder as she sat by the bedside. He breathed heavily, but the pallor of his face, the closed eyes, the prostrate arms, the clammy foam she was wiping from his mouth, all spoke of approaching death. The good old servant had done his duty, at least,—he had brought his master home to die in his wife's arms. The poor woman was too intent on her charge to notice the opening of the door, and as the child would be better away, I closed it gently and went down to the hall to take little Arthur to the shelter below, where the maid was hiding. Too late! He lay at the foot of the stairs on his face, his little arms stretched out, his hair dabbled in blood. I had not noticed the crash among the other noises, but a splinter of a shell must have come through the open doorway; it had carried away the back of his head. The poor child's death must have been instantaneous. I tried to lift up the little corpse with my one arm, but even this load was too much for me, and while stooping down I fainted away.

When I came to my senses again it was quite dark, and for some time I could not make out where I was; I lay indeed for some time like one half asleep, feeling no inclination to move. By degrees I became aware that I was on the carpeted floor of a room. All noise of battle had ceased, but there was a sound as of many people close by. At last I sat up and gradually got to my feet. The movement gave me intense pain, for my wounds were now highly inflamed, and my clothes sticking to them made them dreadfully sore. At last I got up and groped my way to the door, and opening it at once saw where I was, for the pain had brought back my senses. I had been lying in Travers's little writing-room at the end of the passage, into which I made my way. There was no gas, and the drawing-room door was closed; but from the open dining-room the glimmer of a candle feebly lighted up the hall, in which half-a-dozen sleeping figures could be discerned, while the room itself was crowded with men. The table was covered with plates, glasses, and bottles; but most of the men were asleep in the chairs or on the floor, a few were smoking cigars, and one or two with their helmets on were still engaged at supper, occasionally grunting out an observation between the mouthfuls.

“Sind wackere Soldaten, diese Englischen Freiwilligen,” said a broad-shouldered brute, stuffing a great hunch of beef into his mouth with a silver fork, an implement I should think he must have been using for the first time in his life.

“Ja, ja,” replied a comrade, who was lolling back in his chair with a pair of very dirty legs on the table, and one of poor Travers's best cigars in his mouth; “Sie so gat laufen können.”

“Ja wohl,” responded the first speaker; “aber sind nicht eben so schnell wie die Französischen Mobloten.”

“Gewiss,” grunted a hulking lout from the floor, leaning on his elbow, and sending out a cloud of smoke from his ugly jaws; “und da sind hier etwas gute Schützen.”

“Hast recht, lange Peter,” answered number one; “wenn die Schurken so gut exerciren wie schützen könnten, so waren wir heute nicht hier!”

“Recht! recht!” said the second; “das exerciren macht den guten Soldaten.”

What more criticisms on the shortcomings of our unfortunate volunteers might have passed I did not stop to hear, being interrupted by a sound on the stairs. Mrs Travers was standing on the landing-place; I limped up the stairs to meet her. Among the many pictures of those fatal days engraven on my memory, I remember none more clearly than the mournful aspect of my poor friend, widowed and childless within a few moments, as she stood there in her white dress, coming forth like a ghost from the chamber of the dead, the candle she held lighting up her face, and contrasting its pallor with the dark hair that fell disordered round it, its beauty radiant even through features worn with fatigue and sorrow. She was calm and even tearless, though the trembling lip told of the effort to restrain the emotion she felt.

“Dear friend,” she said, taking my hand, “I was coming to seek you; forgive my selfishness in neglecting you so long; but you will understand”—glancing at the door above—“how occupied I have been.”

“Where,” I began, “is—” “My boy?” she answered, anticipating my question. “I have laid him by his father. But now your wounds must be cared for; how pale and faint you look!—rest here a moment,”—and, descending to the dining-room, she returned with some wine, which I gratefully drank, and then, making me sit down on the top step of the stairs, she brought water and linen, and cutting off the sleeve of my coat, bathed and bandaged my wounds.

’Twas I who felt selfish for thus adding to her troubles; but in truth I was too weak to have much will left, and stood in need of the help which she forced me to accept; and the dressing of my wounds afforded indescribable relief. While thus tending me, she explained in broken sentences how matters stood. Every room but her own, and the little parlour into which with Wood’s help she had carried me, was full of soldiers. Wood had been taken away to work at repairing the railroad, and Lucy had run off from fright; but the cook had stopped at her post, and had served up supper and opened the cellar for the soldiers’ use: she herself did not understand what they said, and they were rough and boorish, but not uncivil. I should now go, she said, when my wounds were dressed, to look after my own home, where I might be wanted; for herself, she wished only to be allowed to remain watching there—glancing at the room where lay the bodies of her husband and child—where she would not be molested. I felt that her advice was good. I could be of no use as protection, and I had an anxious longing to know what had become of my sick mother and sister; besides, some arrangement must be made for the burial. I therefore limped away. There was no need to express thanks on either side, and the grief was too deep to be reached by any outward show of sympathy.

Outside the house there was a good deal of movement and bustle; many carts going along, the waggons, from Sussex and Surrey, evidently impressed and guarded by soldiers; and although no gas was burning, the road towards Kingston was well lighted by torches held by persons standing at short intervals in line, who had been seized for the duty, some of them the tenants of neighbouring villas. Almost the first of these torch-bearers I came to was an old gentleman whose face I was well acquainted with, from having frequently travelled up and down in the same train with him. He was a senior clerk in a Government office, I believe, and was a mildlooking old man with a prim face and a long neck, which he used to wrap in a white double neckcloth, a thing even in those days seldom seen. Even in that moment of bitterness I could not help being amused by the absurd figure this poor old fellow presented, with his solemn face and long cravat doing penance with a torch in front of his own gate, to light up the path of our conquerors. But a more serious object now presented itself, a corporal's guard passing by, with two English volunteers in charge, their hands tied behind their backs. They cast an imploring glance at me, and I stepped into the road to ask the corporal what was the matter, and even ventured, as he was passing on, to lay my hand on his sleeve.

“Auf dem Wege, Spitzbube!” cried the brute, lifting his rifle as if to knock me down. “Must one prisoners who fire at us let shoot,” he went on to add; and shot the poor fellows would have been, I suppose, if I had not interceded with an officer, who happened to be riding by.

“Herr Hauptmann,” I cried, as loud as I could, “is this your discipline, to let unarmed prisoners be shot without orders?”

The officer, thus appealed to, reined in his horse, and halted the guard till he heard what I had to say. My knowledge of other languages here stood me in good stead, for the prisoners, northcountry factory hands apparently, were of course utterly unable to make themselves understood, and did not even know in what they had offended. I therefore interpreted their explanation: they had been left behind while skirmishing near Ditton, in a barn, and coming out of their hiding-place in the midst of a party of the enemy, with their rifles in their hands, the latter thought they were going to fire at them from behind. It was a wonder they were not shot down on the spot. The captain heard the tale, and then told the guard to let them go, and they slunk off at once into a by-road. He was a fine soldier-like man, but nothing could exceed the insolence of his manner, which was perhaps all the greater because it seemed not intentional, but to arise from a sense of immeasurable superiority. Between the lame freiwilliger pleading for his comrades, and the captain of the conquering army, there was, in his view, an infinite gulf. Had the two men been dogs, their fate could not have been decided more contemptuously. They were let go simply because they were not worth keeping as prisoners, and perhaps to kill any living thing without cause went against the hauptmann's sense of justice. But why speak of this insult in particular? Had not every man who lived then his tale to tell of humiliation and degradation? For it was the same story everywhere. After the first stand in line, and when once they had got us on the march, the enemy laughed at us. Our handful of regular troops was sacrificed almost to a man in a vain conflict with numbers; our volunteers and militia, with officers who did not know their work, without ammunition or equipment, or staff to superintend, starving in the midst of plenty, we had soon become a helpless mob, fighting desperately here and there, but with whom, as a manoeuvring army, the disciplined invaders did just what they pleased. Happy those whose

bones whitened the fields of Surrey; they at least were spared the disgrace we lived to endure. Even you, who have never known what it is to live otherwise than on sufferance, even your cheeks burn when we talk of these days; think, then, what those endured who, like your grandfather, had been citizens of the proudest nation on earth, which had never known disgrace or defeat, and whose boast it used to be that they bore a flag on which the sun never set! We had heard of generosity in war; we found none; the war was made by us, it was said, and we must take the consequences. London and our only arsenal captured, we were at the mercy of our captors, and right heavily did they tread on our necks. Need I tell you the rest?—of the ransom we had to pay, and the taxes raised to cover it, which keep us paupers to this day?—the brutal frankness that announced we must give place to a new naval Power, and be made harmless for revenge?—the victorious troops living at free quarters, the yoke they put on us made the more galling that their requisitions had a semblance of method and legality? Better have been robbed at first hand by the soldiery themselves, than through our own magistrates made the instruments for extortion. How we lived through the degradation we daily and hourly underwent, I hardly even now understand. And what was there left to us to live for? Stripped of our colonies; Canada and the West Indies gone to America; Australia forced to separate; India lost for ever, after the English there had all been destroyed, vainly trying to hold the country when cut off from aid by their countrymen; Gibraltar and Malta ceded to the new naval Power; Ireland independent and in perpetual anarchy and revolution. When I look at my country as it is now—its trade gone, its factories silent, its harbours empty, a prey to pauperism and decay—when I see all this, and think what Great Britain was in my youth, I ask myself whether I have really a heart or any sense of patriotism that I should have witnessed such degradation and still care to live! France was different. There, too, they had to eat the bread of tribulation under the yoke of the conqueror! their fall was hardly more sudden or violent than ours; but war could not take away their rich soil; they had no colonies to lose; their broad lands, which made their wealth, remained to them; and they rose again from the blow. But our people could not be got to see how artificial our prosperity was—that it all rested on foreign trade and financial credit; that the course of trade once turned away from us, even for a time, it might never return; and that our credit once shaken might never be restored. To hear men talk in those days, you would have thought that Providence had ordained that our Government should always borrow at three per cent, and that trade came to us because we lived in a foggy little island set in a boisterous sea. They could not be got to see that the wealth heaped up on every side was not created in the country, but in India and China, and other parts of the world; and that it would be quite possible for the people who made money by buying and selling the natural treasures of the earth, to go and live in other places, and take their profits with them. Nor would men believe that there could ever be an end to our coal and iron, or that they would get to be so much dearer than the coal and iron of America that it would no longer be worth while to work them, and that therefore we ought to insure against the loss of our artificial position as the great centre of trade, by making ourselves secure and strong and respected. We thought we were living in a commercial millennium, which must last for a thousand years at least. After all the bitterest part of our reflection is, that all this misery and decay might have been so easily prevented, and that we brought it about ourselves by our own shortsighted recklessness. There, across the narrow Straits, was the writing on the wall, but we would not choose to read it. The warnings of the few were drowned in the voice of the multitude. Power was then passing away from the class which had been used to rule, and to face political dangers, and which had brought the nation with honour unsullied through former struggles, into the hands of the lower classes, uneducated, untrained to the use of political rights, and swayed by

demagogues; and the few who were wise in their generation were denounced as alarmists, or as aristocrats who sought their own aggrandisement by wasting public money on bloated armaments. The rich were idle and luxurious; the poor grudged the cost of defence. Politics had become a mere bidding for Radical votes, and those who should have led the nation stooped rather to pander to the selfishness of the day, and humoured the popular cry which denounced those who would secure the defence of the nation by enforced arming of its manhood, as interfering with the liberties of the people. Truly the nation was ripe for a fall; but when I reflect how a little firmness and self-denial, or political courage and foresight, might have averted the disaster, I feel that the judgment must have really been deserved. A nation too selfish to defend its liberty, could not have been fit to retain it. To you, my grandchildren, who are now going to seek a new home in a more prosperous land, let not this bitter lesson be lost upon you in the country of your adoption. For me, I am too old to begin life again in a strange country; and hard and evil as have been my days, it is not much to await in solitude the time which cannot now be far off, when my old bones will be laid to rest in the soil I have loved so well, and whose happiness and honour I have so long survived.

THE END

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