

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 14, ISSUE 9
3RD FEBRUARY 2019

KASSI AND THE SEVEN

KNIGHTS

BY STE
WHITEHOUSE
SEBASTIAN.
WE HAVE
COMPANY...

BENJAMIN'S VENGEANCE

BY
CHRISTOPHER T.
DABROWSKI—
UGH, WHAT A
LIFE...

**RAMSEY
CAMPBELL'S
MIDNIGHT SUN
REVIEWED
BY JOHN C ADAMS**

**THE GOD
WORM
ROB BLISS**

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Schlock! Webzine

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Dabrowski., GK Murphy, Ste Whitehouse, Gregory KH Bryant, Rob Bliss, H Rider Haggard, A
Merritt*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 14, Issue 9
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Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels, and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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

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

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *Le noir et le blanc* by [Stephane Gaudry](#). Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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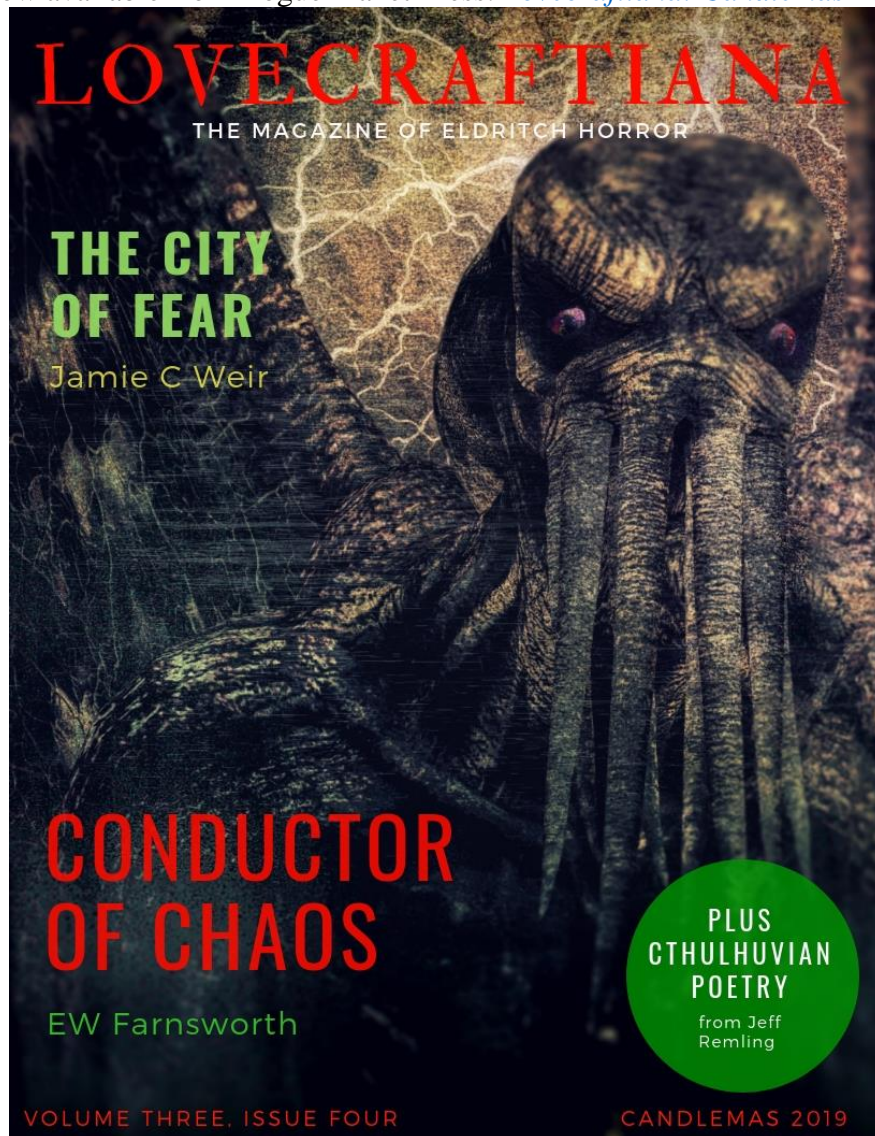
EDITORIAL

This week, we make a return to Kassi and the Pipe-World (with a useful little recap at the start). Elsewhere, an ill-treated dog gets his own back. John C Adams reviews a Ramsey Campbell novel. And GK Murphy returns with a tale of nuclear disaster in Cumbria.

A slob meets his god, while Carter Ward and Lacey face a bloodthirsty mob. Eric Brighteyes battles a baresark. And in The Moon Pool, Yolara arrives.

—Gavin Chappell

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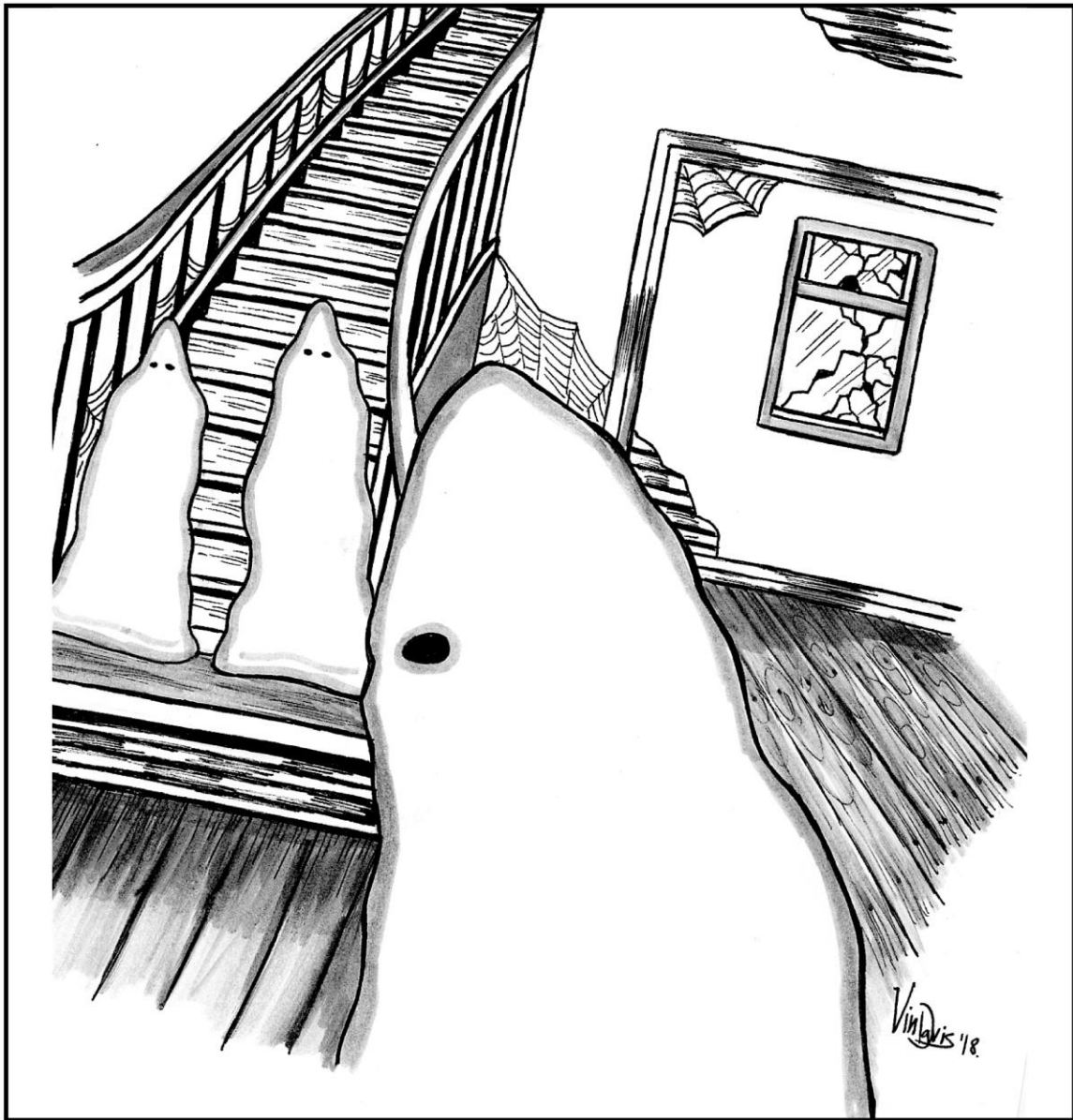


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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"HAVE YOU NOTICED CARL? HE SEEMS PREOCCUPIED, DETACHED FROM LIFE."

Vincent is an artist who has consistently been on assignment in the art world for over twenty years. Throughout his career he has acquired a toolbox of diverse skills (from freehand drawing to digital design, t-shirt designer to muralist). His styles range from the wildly abstract to pulp style comics.

In 2013, his work in END TIMES won an award in the Best Horror Anthology category for that year. When Vincent is not at his drawing board he can be found in the classroom teaching

cartooning and illustration to his students at Westchester Community College in Valhalla NY.

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

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KASSI AND THE SEVEN KNIGHTS by Ste Whitehouse

'The Pipe-world, Ah'kis, is five thousand miles long and just over ten miles in diameter. Kassi seeks her brother who has been kidnapped by 'demons' and now travel north to the end of the world. She is accompanied by Sebastian a sentient bot of dubious origins with whom she can communicate telepathically. That ability seems to set her apart from the rest of the world's population.'

Kassi and Sebastian came to the large clearing mid-morning. It stretched up and lengthwise to The Seam, the main thoroughfare along the world of Ah'kis. Almost square it was three hundred yards across twisting counter-clockwise foreshortening the trees opposite them. Mounds of weeds and plant growth dotted the curved space. She knelt and fingered the ground beneath the thin dry soil. Black flakes peppered the soil. Sebastian called it tarmac and said that it was a sign of civilisation. Sebastian said a lot of stupid things.

Kassi was human, a little over six feet tall and willowy with eyes the colour of sunshine on summer leaves and skin a deep bronze. A tumble of black hair fell across her shoulders. Sebastian meanwhile was a mechanoid. Multi jointed with eight limbs and a small oval protuberance that could possibly be called a head. It contained the neural network that consisted of his mind and two lenses; one of deepest blue. The metal that formed his 'skin' was smooth and dull but warm to the touch. That and his 'personality' gave him an almost human quality that disturbed most people. Kassi was, fortunately, not most people.

"Most likely a car park," Sebastian said flatly as if answering some unasked question. "Whatever building it served has long gone but people maintained this and the Motorway for a lot longer." The Motorway was what he called The Seam. He often had alternate words to describe things.

"You know I hear words and understand about one in three of them," Kassi replied with a smile before holding up a hand. "And no, I do not want an explanation. After your last attempt I may never be able to look at a clown ever again!"

Sebastian raised an arm/leg and gestured indicating a shrug.

They paused along the edge of the tumble of forest looking across the expanse of ground. The trees wore mostly greens but the cold air heralded the coming winter and snatches of reds and gold littered the branches. Overhead the sunline was indistinct hidden by large flat clouds of dull grey as they cork-screwed around the distant light.

"I shall skirt the edge," he finally replied peeling away and back into the forest silently. Kassi stepped forward shifting her scabbard in readiness and dropping her shield around to her right side. She strode across the emptiness her long legs eating up the distance.

It was when she had reached almost halfway that the men appeared. Five knights on horseback their metal armour glinting as the sunline slipped from behind the clouds five miles above. Slowly they rode forward in a line neither aggressively nor seemingly peaceful. No sword or

lance rose, no shield came around in readiness, but their intensity radiated a malignancy. The middle knight had a cloak of purest blue which almost dramatically billowed in the soft breeze.

{Sebastian. We have company. Be careful you may have...} As she projected her thoughts via the psychic link they shared there was a sudden wash of noiseless sound over her. An implosion of thought; and then there was an emptiness where she had felt Sebastian's presence.

Shit!

Two other knights rode out from the left side of the clearing hurrying to join their brothers who still rode patiently forward. Kassi did not try her friend again. She had felt something similar years ago when they had been hit by what Sebastian called 'an electro-magnetic pulse.' Then it had knocked the mechanoid unconscious until he rebooted. With luck he may come back online within twenty minutes; just in time to see her eviscerated by these seven.

Kassi watched and considered before swinging the backpack from her shoulders and pulling out her crossbow. She choose the bolt carefully and then placed her foot in the stirrup and pulled the string back. She lifted the crossbow and as one each knight raised his shield. Aiming at the second from the right she fired. The bolt soared true striking the man's shield dead centre. Kassi was quite pleased. Despite the heavy embossing the bolt had struck hard and was embedded in the shield. The men laughed, and she heard the red-haired man who rode in the centre call her 'the golden skinned bitch'." She counted to five and then turned and ran.

Behind her the bolt exploded into noise and light—a 'flashbang' Sebastian called them. The man's horse reared and the horses either side pulled away despite their riders' efforts. No one was injured but hopefully she had three less to worry about for the next minute or so. The girl spun around, her shield horizontal, thankful to see three of the rider's struggle with their mounts and fall back from the line. She pressed a button on the shields arm support and it split cleanly into two circles the knife edged outer rim spinning high into the air.

The four remaining knights began to speed up as the larger portion of the shield arched across the opening shifting under the delicate touch of Kassi's fingers. She shifted it left and then right heading for the red-haired man before, at the last second, changing course and slamming the razor edge into the rider to his right. He had no time to react before the spinning edge of the shield slammed into the narrow aperture of his helmet. He screamed and fell from his horse even as the shield began its return journey. A smattering of expletives filled the air smothered by the man's groans. One down!

"Bitch!" The rider to her far left broke rank and charged at her sword high. Kassi smiled turned and ran across the clearing leaping onto a collection of mounds. She felt the shield click back into place its extra weight barely slowing her as she danced across the roofs of long abandoned vehicles. The knight followed her up onto the dozen or so mounds without a thought; roaring and spitting out swear words that even Kassi had never heard before.

She felt the thin metal rip rather than heard it as the millennia old alloys from what Sebastian called cars gave way beneath the knight and his heavily armoured horse. She felt sorry for the

beast, she had no desire to kill such a magnificent animal, but was left with little choice. She turned back as the man fumbled his sword flailing like a metronome; the horse a frenzy of pain and fear, its back legs shattered in the fall.

In three light steps she was above the man and with all her might she swung her own broadsword catching his sword arm just above the elbow. His chainmail was thin and badly mended. Twists of wire and disparate metals of dubious use shattered as her sword cut through and into the man's arm. At first she thought that she may have to pull her sword out slowing her up but suddenly it was free, continuing its arc and stopping at the man's helmet with a resounding clang. His hand, still clutching its sword, dropped to the ground mudding the soil as blood seeped from the freshly severed end into the dry earth. She tasted iron in the air and felt a warm spray of blood fall across her arm. The second man screamed but remained prone for the last minute of his life. Two down!

In sorrow she stopped briefly to kill the horse, putting it out of its misery.

Another horseman broke ranks despite the cry of the red haired man who was obviously their leader. Wisely he wound his way through the rotting mounds of ancient vehicles swinging a deadly looking chain mace alongside the horse. Kassi knew well enough the impact just one strike would have. If the spiked ball was heavy enough it could even damage her blade. Although she was not as fond of it as the blade Mataso had given her a decade ago—(Kassi and the Sword)—it served its purpose well and she would hate to have to find a new one yet again—also she could almost hear Sebastian berating her over her 'carelessness' as though getting into fights was somehow her fault.

Considering her options the girl sheathed her sword, turned and ran towards the horseman surprising him enough to cause him to mis-swing the mace. Kassi suddenly dropped to the ground rolling twice before finding a stout branch. She rolled back onto her feet just in time for the horseman to reach her, mace in mid swing. Dodging she poked the oak branch catching the chain and causing the heavy metal sphere to rotate quickly around. Before it found her hand she dropped heavily to the ground pulling hard with all her weight on the chain now caught up in the branch.

She felt the branch snap in three but already the knight was clumsily trying to regain his balance. To help him Kassi sliced through the girth—the leather strap used to hold the saddle onto the horse—and rolled out of the way, knife in hand. The man slid off in slow motion; clinging desperately to his saddle despite the knowledge that it was the thing actually slipping from the horse. Free of the man's heavy weight the horse reared up and called out in triumph before galloping away into the surrounding forest.

Kassi unsheathed her sword and, almost casually, strolled over to the prone man. He tried to regain his stance but she found him still on his hands and knees struggling to stand up. With one hefty push from her foot the man rolled onto his back. The girl stood on his weapons hand and looked down at him. He had pale blue eyes, wide now with fear, visible through the narrow slit in his helmet. Kassi rotated her blade just so and pushed it through the slot. The man screamed once. Three down.

There was a cry from the remaining men. The red haired leader now joined by the other three began to gallop across the remaining clearing. She had less than a second to think; reacting more on instinct as she turned to face the four horsemen. She flicked her right arm out sliding the outer shield away again and then began to run towards them. The shield flashed brilliantly in the sunlight its hard edge catching the sunline causing the rim to appear aflame. It arched following the path set by Kassi's nimble fingers before flying towards the riders.

They veered to their right, as she had planned, and—finding the way partially impassable due to a collection of ancient vehicles—weaved left and then right again. Kassi was closing in when the leader of the group drew out two long tubes. She had seen—and felt—magic like them before, and Sebastian had explained what they were. The stock and trigger were much like those on a crossbow but the metal tube and thick cylinder leant it a sleeker more deadly look. She swung the inner section of shield up and flicked the energy field on. Blue lightning crackled around the shield.

The red haired man fired from both 'guns'—as the mechanoid called them—and Kassi saw them flash against the energy emanating from her shield. A dozen slugs of metal impacted the energy field before Kassi falling impotently to the ground.

"Fucking bitch!" one of the other men said scowling as they came out of the chicane of ancient cars two abreast. Before them a low mound disrupted their flow separating them into two short columns. Kassi leapt up onto the mound.

"You know I really ought to get you men a thesaurus. I mean I'm more than a bitch. Honestly. I can be a vixen, vamp, tramp, tart, harlot, hussy, witch and my favourite, termagant. Builders knows what it means but I just love the way it rolls off the tongue." She ducked two sword thrusts and leant to her left pushing up and placing a hand squarely on the rump of the leading horse. Momentum carried her up where she pushed hard with her arm launching her upwards over the second knight.

She had—for a year or two when young—wanted to be a dancer. Not the rote stomping and wailing sort that most people managed only when pissed and at 'significant' times of the year—which surprisingly occurred almost weekly. No Kassi had seen the dancers who toured with the fairs or the travellers. They wore, without fail, flowery dresses and somehow defied gravity flowing and dancing with their whole body. Arms and hands; eyes and torso. Every part creating the dance.

One of the older women from a nearby village had travelled Ah'kis as a dancer when young and she had taken Kassi on, much to her mother's dismay. THAT was where Kassi had learnt many of the words she had taunted the knights with, by listening to her mother speak about Mrs Baxter after dark when she thought the child asleep. Two years she spent going backwards and forth between the villages learning Alegria's, Pirouettes and Penche. Perfecting the stretches she still used today to keep supple and nimble. When she finally gave up on dancing it was because she had discovered a far deadlier dance involving blades.

Kassi rotated over the knight sword in hand catching at the man's throat. The mail covering his head and neck were in as bad a state as the earlier rider and the edge of her sword easily cut through the mail leaving an arc of blood in its wake. She finished the leap with a pose; arms raised and back arched as though finishing some difficult pirouette on the long mat at Mrs Baxter's. The knight reined in his steed and turned with difficulty in the confined space to face her, blood streaming down the front of his mail-shirt. He dug spurs into the horses flank and leant forward. Kassi waited only a few yards distance. As he neared the man slipped off the horse which, without guidance, halted briefly before galloping away from the young woman. Four down.

She quickly slipped both parts of her shield across her back, its positron field shimmering with a bluish tint in the cold autumn air. Turning she ran for the forests edge, the sound of horses hoofs pounding the ground filling the gaps between her deep breathes. The leaders 'wand' sounded sharp and close although she neither felt nor heard the bullets smash against her ephemeral shield. A few tufts of soil exploded into the air close to Kassi's feet and she was glad that the shield was set to maximum, meaning that it enveloped her back fully.

She heard their leader call out in vain trying to corral them together but anger had risen too high and at least one of the knights desired blood. She reached the edge mere moments before the knight on his horse came blundering into the forest behind her snapping branches and carelessly pushing his steed onwards despite the threat of entangled roots. She used a trunk to turn herself abruptly and slowed enough to ensure she remained sure-footed amongst the web of roots and low branches.

The sunline remained out casting the forest into pockets of deep shadow and Kassi was thankful for the browns of her leather armour and clothes. Before the Knights vision could adjust for the shade she had vanished whilst he stood out amongst the foliage; a burnished silver figure floating across the forest.

She swung up onto a low lying oak branch as thick as her waist and climbed upwards and around before leaving the outer aspect of her shield there and dropping to the ground. Her landing a dull thud which echoed through the trees alerted the knight. Kassi raised her crossbow and waited until she had a clear line of sight. The bolt ran true but the knight was quicker than she had hoped and it skimmed harmlessly across the surface of his large oval shield before embedding into a tree yards away.

The knight leant forward his sword pointed at her but before he could order his mount to move the bolt exploded causing the horse to rear up and giving Kassi a few seconds lead. She darted through the forest dodging roots and branches before burying herself in a drift of leaves. She waited holding her breath sensing the great weight of horse and rider close the distance. As they passed she leapt up and onto the back of the horse signalling her shield. Sebastian had told her that the shield could manage speeds of 'up to fifty miles per hour'

The man dug his elbow backwards as Kassi dragged her sword across mail and plate armour trying to find an opening. This man's armour was better cared for, his mail repaired professionally. She clung on as the he struggled and tried to find a way to attack her. His

attention was fully on Kassi and not her shield. It hit him square in the chest knocking both of them to the ground. Kassi rolled and picked up her shield. The last two knights had entered the forest. She spun around catching the downed knight across the side of his helmet with her boot. He lay on the ground, incapacitated for the moment.

The sixth knight slid expertly from the saddle and faced her, his broadsword held aloft in both hands a smile playing on his thin black lips. She brought her shield forward and checked its battery. 87%. Hoping that it would be enough she ran forward and flipped the switches that Sebastian had said never to flip. The giant of a man laughed and ran at her swinging his thick slab of metal at her head. Her shield spluttered and an arch of light almost as bright as the sunline on a summers day zagged across the narrowing gap between them.

Kassi dodged to one side as the man staggered forward three more steps before he stumbled and fell face forward in the dirt. He shuddered twice as though his spirit struggled to leave and then lay silent. Trey life was now zero. She recalled Sebastian saying 'and NEVER press that and that together. You could kill someone with the discharge.' It appeared that he was correct. The knight behind her staggered to his feet the indentation of his armour slowing him down. Kassi kicked at the large man lying at her feet to ensure he was dead and then faced the smaller man. Five down.

She ran at the knight ducking at the last instance and thrusting the edge of her shield down hard on the man's foot. His boot was thick leather and circled in bands of steel but the edge of Kassi's shield pushed the band of metal into his foot. He grunted in pain and caught her shoulder with a swipe of his hand knocking her away. She smiled as he tried to step towards her. His foot may not be broken or even damaged much but his boot was now mangled and slowing him down. Every step would be painful until he removed it, which he would never get the chance to do.

She rolled to her feet glancing at the last man, their leader. He merely stood by his mount waiting. She had fought five men to their deaths and 'ran the Circumference and back' as the saying went. The only advantage she had was the lightness of her armour but no one could be expected to battle on this way for long. Already her arms felt heavy and her calf muscles ached.

A grunt from the man gave her enough time to dodge his lacklustre thrust and she caught the edge of his sword on hers as he drew it back. She thought that perhaps she had seen a chip fly from his sword, or else it was hers. He swung again and she parried. It was his sword that broke and its sudden release toppled him sideways.

Kassi slid her own blade back along the edge of his upper armour cutting away chainmail. He swung his own battered shield but she easily dodged it thrusting her sword up and under. There was a satisfying sense of resistance followed by the blade sliding forward. She stepped back and waited.

The man hobbled forward his right boot pressing down on the bones of his foot. Kassi moved slowly, conserving her energy for the next fight. He swung the snub of metal that had been his sword and she parried it nimbly before dancing away on the balls of her feet. He waited; unwilling, or unable, to move his foot. She shifted from side to side but could not encircle him as it left her open to attack by the last knight.

A trapped animal was always the hardest. The knight understood that he no longer had anywhere to go. He had nothing now to lose but a life that was limited anyway. If she waited a few hours he would die anyhow. If she turned and walked away he could not follow her but she still had the red haired leader to deal with. And in truth if she was to fight she would prefer it to be one on one. She felt weary and unwilling to leave a man down but still able to attack her while she fought the last knight.

Without warning she screamed defiantly and leapt. He brought his shield up and she grabbed its edge riding her momentum up and over. She slapped the broad side of her sword against his face guard feeling the satisfactory crunch of metal—and bone. As she landed her sword nipped at the man's heels and he toppled over. She stood facing the last knight even as she ran the crippled man through. Six down.

“Well. I must admit to some surprise. The bounty was generous but I had no idea why it was so.” He had slipped his sword casually under his arm and was applauding her. “The Golden Skinned Girl.... Still the more coin for me, eh?”

He shifted effortlessly into a good fighting stance sword and butler at the ready. He looked as though he had stepped from the scrolls of some heroic play. Fresh and relaxed. Kassi felt like shit. Still ‘a bounty?’ She must look into that she decided; if she lived past the next few minutes.

She smiled. Bowed gracefully and then ran like hell away from him.

He hesitated less than a heartbeat before he raced after her, cloak swirling behind. She found the ancient oak tree again and ran into its branches, carefully picking her route through them even as the last knight effortlessly caught up with her.

“You’re good. I’ll give you that girl but I’ve yet to raise my sword in anger and you’ve been fighting this last quarter hour. Do you really think this is going down any other way?”

Kassi dodged left and said loudly, “No. It’s going down exactly as planned.” She hoped.

He ducked as her shield spun through the air before stepping to his right. Her shield rebounded twice before skimming to the forest floor powerless. Kassi ran around him and deeper into the tangle of roots and branches of the oak. The last knight turned and seeing Kassi little more than an arm's length from him leapt forward. His sword became tangled in a low branch. He jerked it free but the girl was already a dozen paces ahead of him. He stepped forward but came up short as his cloak caught in other branches.

He hacked away at the branch but Kassi was already on him her sword biting deeply at his side. He roared and swung his blade in an arc missing the girl as she ducked and scurried away. He stepped forward but again his cloak became entangled causing him to falter. His foot caught a root and he half stumbled. He clutched at his throat trying to free himself from the cloak but Kassi did not give him time.

Out of nowhere she came silently taking another nick of flesh from his side. He struggled to turn and already she had slapped her sword hard against his helmet before running its edge deep across his side. It would be a good tale if after facing six knights the seventh was a battle of epic proportions but in truth Kassi nipped at the beleaguered knight as a dog at the heels of a stag. A weary exhausted dog. Slowly, gently even, she wore him down. Eventually she came in for the kill and so all seven were down.

{I see that you have finished.} Sebastian said softly.

{And I'm happy to see you also.} Kassi replied sarcastically, adding. {A little help would have been appreciated.}

{You appeared to have it all in hand and besides...}

She sighed. {You can't hold a sword in those little bitty hands of yours.}

{I was about to say that I would be as likely to harm you as the man but the essence is the same.} He replied a little too huffily.

Kassi leant against the oak tree as Sebastian came into view with one of the steeds in hand.

"I bring a peace offering," he said warmly offering her the reins.

She would have sworn that behind his one blue lens and one clear lens he was smirking.

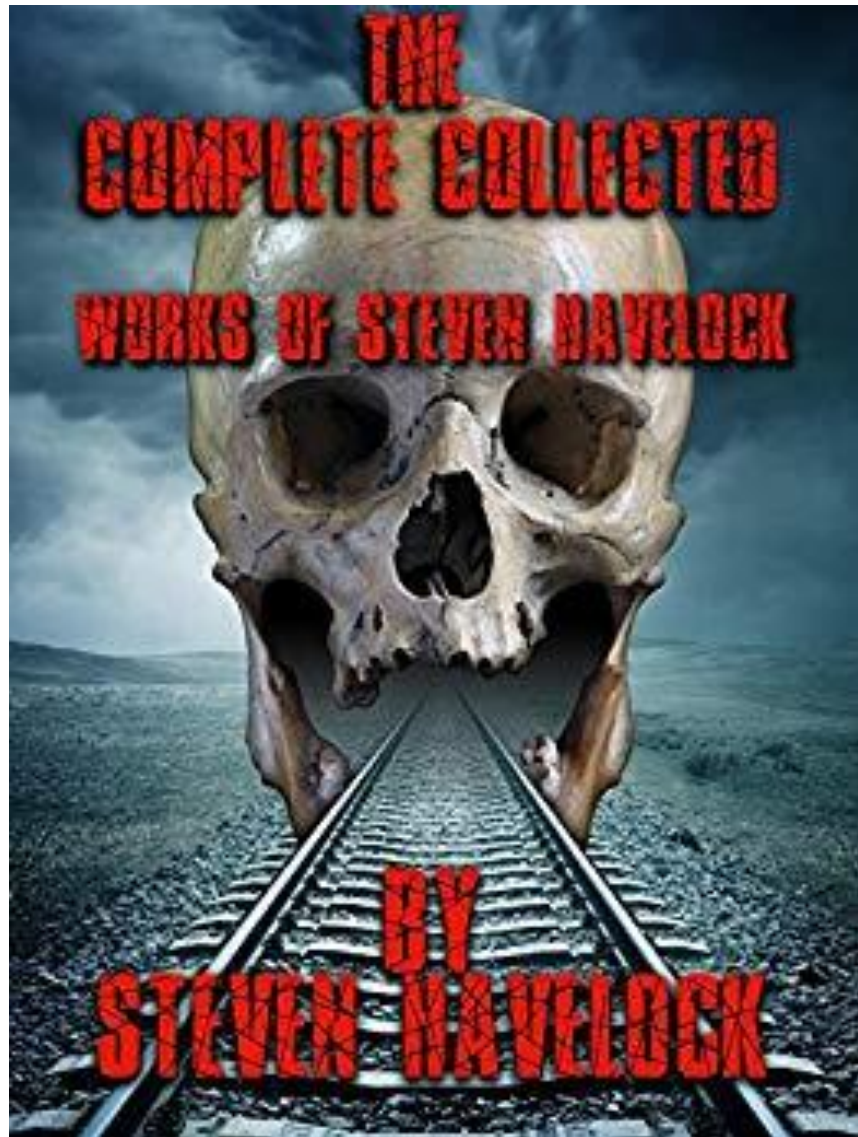
"This does not make us even," she replied firmly picking up her drained shield.

"I think that if you include the last dungeon and the past two, no three villages then I am. . ."

"Wait a goddamn minute. The one village I had to rescue YOU from a tower and. . ."

She mounted the horse still arguing with the mechanoid. It was an argument that lasted until they reached the next village three days later!

THE END



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BENJAMIN'S VENGEANCE by Christopher T. Dabrowski, translated by Monika Olasek

He was slowly getting used to it. He had to. He had no other choice. The old woman put the collar on him and attached the lead to it. It was so humiliating—he felt like a slave. She was well in her seventies and was 20 kilos overweight. In her trembling, spotted hand she held a muzzle. Why was she doing this? Had she ever considered how unpleasant it was? And what if somebody muzzled her—how would she feel then? He turned around. What is this game all about? Why all this dressing up? Unfortunately, a dog has got to do what a dog has got to do, when he is dependent on someone. Sometimes it pays to accept the whims of the old lady. After all, if it wasn't for her, he would be just as skinny as those who were left behind. Instead of nice fat, he would have a keyboard of ribs under his skin. He felt that the woman was getting irritated, but had to show that he didn't like it at all, just for the sake of his pure, congenial perversity.

“Benjamin! Benjamin, turn back at once!”—She wanted her trembling, squeaky voice to sound masterfully, but it was side-splitting instead.—“Benjamin, do you hear me? You nasty, you!”

You are lucky that you give me such good food—he thought.—In any other case I wouldn't stand that chattering.

He turned back to avoid beating with the lead. A few times, when he went too far, he got a good thrashing. It hurt. Unpleasant variety of everyday routine. She bent to attach the torture tool. Her face, red from anger, was covered with a network of small wrinkles and beads of sweat. She started to breathe heavily. Was she really enjoying this? He felt an unpleasant odour—some garlic, a bit of onion and the worst one: smell of indigestion coming straight from her intestines. The smell was horrifying but he couldn't turn away; he would certainly get a beating if he did. That he was absolutely sure of. He could only take a deep breath and try to survive. It wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't for those trembling, clumsy hands. Unfortunately, snapping always lasted too long. He felt that he would soon become the world champion in a new discipline: breath holding. The worst thing was that even a champion had to give up sometimes. He felt dizzy. He heard his heartbeat. And the dame was flabbily fighting with the snap, and the end of this fight wasn't near.

The spring was in full blossom. The sun was shining. The birds were singing joyfully, flirting with one another. There was a scent of freshly mowed grass in the air. Benjamin felt that now was the time to do this. He was waiting for this moment far too long.

He squacked down.

“Benjamin! Not on the sidewalk!”—was yelling his oppressor.—“Go to the lawn!”

Oh God, I can't even poo like a man, in peace—thought the annoyed dog and went to look for a better (according to her criteria) place. He had suffered so much. Since six in the morning, for three hours and a half he was scratching the door, trying to signalize that it was the time. Every day the same thing. Humiliating whimper at the door. He didn't have the courage to

demonstratively poo on the carpet, although he often felt like it. He knew far too well what the output would be. Lead! Pain! Sometimes he thought he was going insane. Not only the terrifying name, but also leads, collars, muzzles! Additionally, whenever he was getting ready to flirt and was about to catch some cute female, she was always yelling... “Here!” and she took him home. He couldn’t even relieve himself in peace, because she was beginning to scold him. Because something was not the way she wanted! Ugh, what a life...

If it wasn’t for the delicious food, he wouldn’t stand up to that treadmill. The price was high, but the delicacies he was getting were first class. Everyday some fresh meat. Delicious, delicate dog snacks. Mmmm, yum—yum!

When he was a puppy and lived in a shelter, he was often hungry. He got only scraps, once in two or three days. He had to fight for better bites. There were plenty of mouths eager to eat. In the winter, he spent all day curled up, without moving. Every movement was a nightmare to the chilled dog—it made him feel the cold even more. Autumn wasn’t much better; storms and rain. Wet fur, brrr!

Yes, he had to be honest—it wasn’t so bad with the old woman.

Every month the memories got weaker and weaker. Every day he felt more of the poverty and humiliations she was giving him.

—A bad time has come on us, Benjamin.—She sighed with resignation.—We have a problem. No money left. You will not understand, but my pension is too small for me to buy you the kind of food you are used to. I cannot afford it, darling.

More or less, he understood what was going on. The tone in her voice, troubled look on her face and the usual time of feeding him with fresh, bloody meat, made him guess what the bad news was about. It was about his delicacies. He looked at her, asking. The old lady reached to the fridge and something rattled into Benjamin’s bowl. It wasn’t the sound of meat. The smell was also weird. She put the bowl on the floor. He took a glimpse. No way! Was she joking? She put a handful of picked chicken bones into his bowl! Was this supposed to be his dinner? Well, she decided to tighten his belt. She probably wants to check how much further she can go in the art of humiliating him. The damned sadist!

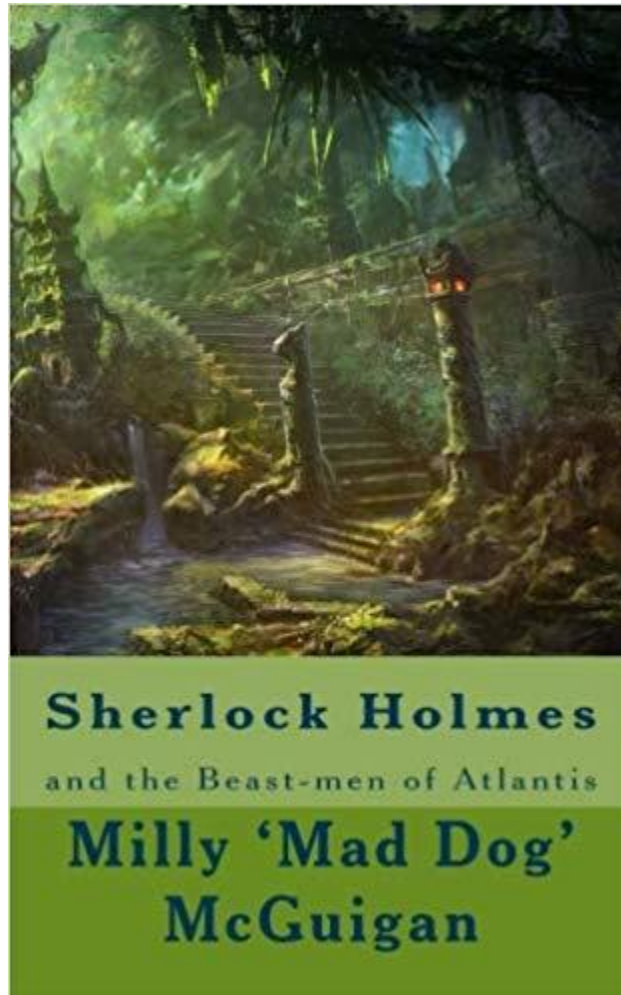
She knew she was disappointing him, but she couldn’t do anything else. Up to then she had often denied herself many things just for her four legged darling to have the best. She was really trying. She often visited a couple of different shops and compared prices, to save as much as she could for Benjamin. Unfortunately, the latest increase in prices had destroyed all her efforts. Now, to survive through the month they have to live sparingly.

She was looking at her darling doggie. The “Doggie”, a well-grown Rottweiler, was looking at her.

He made a dash. He knocked the old woman down and with one snap of his jaws he mutilated her throat. A blood spurted from her arteries.

Fresh, hot meat...

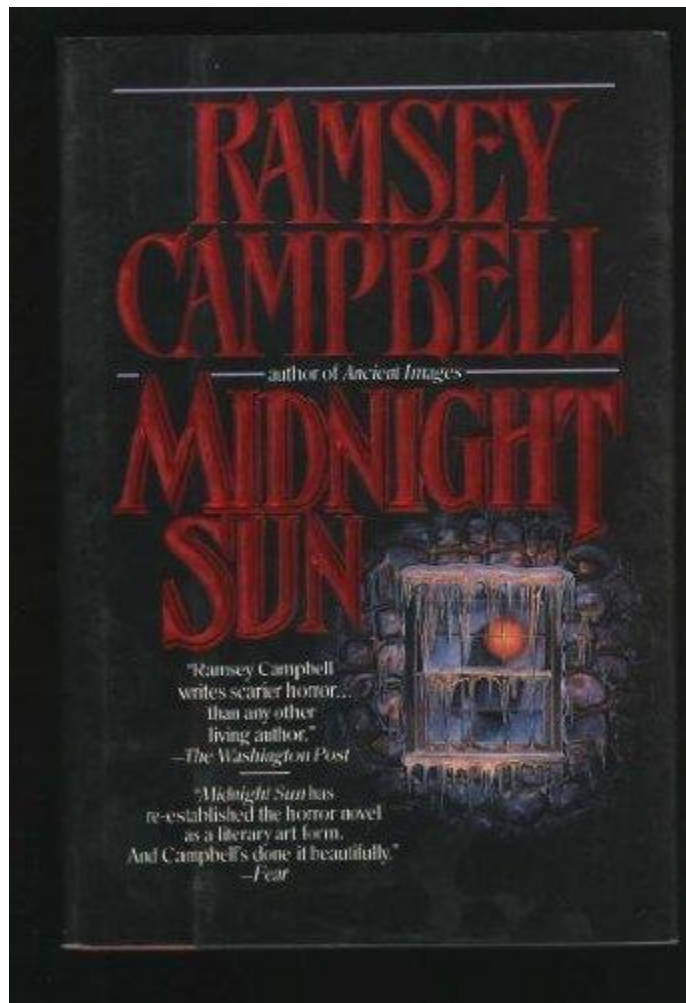
THE END



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REVIEW by John C Adams

Midnight Sun by Ramsey Campbell



I love Ramsey Campbell's writing and being December-born I'm always up for a novel about the cold grip of winter upon our souls.

In *Midnight Sun* a love of the cold, and an overwhelming tendency to be drawn towards it, have been with Ben Sterling his whole life. It's an odd sort of inheritance for a young lad. His grandfather had travelled north to the polar regions to research First Nation legends of a ritual designed to keep the freezing cold at bay by keeping the Midnight Sun in the sky all winter.

Edward Sterling's last book is called *Of the Midnight Sun*. He is found half dead of cold in the arctic wastes and is brought home to Stargrave in northern England to die. As an adult, Ben returns to Stargrave House with his family. It isn't long before the cold is reaching out to him, drawing him in and luring him away from his wife and children:

“The pattern was around him on the grass, a many-armed star of frost as wide as the glade. The outlines of the slender arms were awesomely intricate and yet symmetrical in every detail. He turned dizzily, feeling in danger of losing his balance, and saw that the star wasn’t quite symmetrical: it lacked the three arms which would have pointed to the oaks he had failed to approach. The star showed where he had walked, as if a vast cold presence had paced behind him.”

The odd effect that Stargrave is having on Ben begins to take its toll on the family too, distancing Ben from his wife Ellen and their two children, Johnny and Margaret:

“He stayed where he was and watched her lead the children down the path, into a twilight which appeared to grow darker in some exact but obscure relationship with the shrinking of the three of them. When Ellen sent him a look of mingled appeal and reproach, he trudged after them.”

The dark and the cold gradually encircle the village and make their way up to Sterling House itself:

“The night flocked to meet her. It was snowing so heavily that the lights of the town appeared doused. Flakes almost as large as the palm of her hand sailed out of the whiteness and shattered on the window. She had never seen snowflakes so crystalline; in the instant before each of them broke and slithered down the glass, they looked like florid translucent stars.”

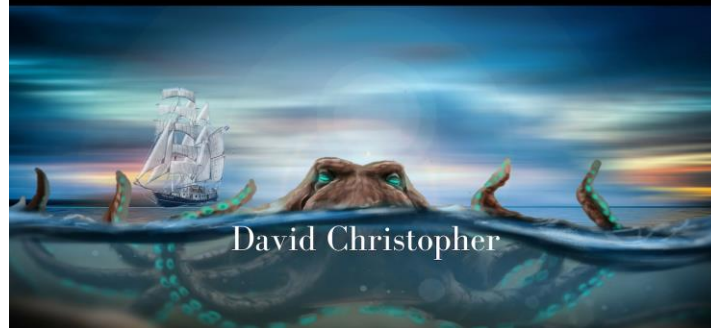
Ramsey Campbell deftly produces a satisfyingly positive ending despite the increasingly dark clouds circling around the central character.

Enjoy!

THE END

GONZO PULP PUBLICATIONS
PRESENT

Long John Silver and the Squid-God of Lemuria



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PINK BLOSSOMS AND GLASS by GK Murphy

A surprisingly sunny day in West Cumbria, and in particular for the tiny hamlet of Hall Wood which nearly always seemed to suffer the brunt of northern weather. The population seemed like pigs that had no choice of their own but, to make the best of a bad deal, had to endure the stinking expansive pools of sewage that leaked into the farmyard swill bins.

Not so for Lucinda Peavey though, who today was having a good time sunbathing in the garden, in an era where summer preceded spring, delivering unto Cumbria's folk this once-rare glorious February sunshine in the British Isles. For the 25-year-old Lucinda, as she lay on the towel on the grass in the centre of the garden whilst her partner Jack laboured at work three miles away, sunshine was welcome.

Twenty minutes or so into her sojourn, however, the chill began to ravage her limbs, and she groaned and shivered and wondered what the hell could be the profound reason for such a bitter breeze?

It lasted five seconds only.

Yet the sky turned a rare green-yellow for a moment, before it flickered with a flash of light, not once but two or three times before it eventually returned to its natural blue lustre.

Whatever the reason, it was the lightning-like flash and brief booming noise that caused this chill to get a grip of the senses and squeeze for dear life. Lucinda had a light-bulb moment; she swallowed hard and took a deep breath, realizing the distant thumping bang she heard must have been an explosion, courtesy of the nuclear plant ten miles up the road, in the town of Sea Croft—where Jack and a huge heap of other locals worked.

The plant generated much sought-after revenue for all involved in its operation, as well as the energy it provided for the county.

“Oh God, no, please...” Lucinda muttered, drooling as she fell backwards onto the towel, dizziness taking its grip.

Diabetes could have this effect. Like so many times in the past, Lucinda had bypassed breakfast to nip into town to get some shopping in for the week, and forgot to take her morning dose of insulin.

She was so dizzy and disorientated right now she could barely raise an arm or leg.

It looked like she would have to wait for Jack to get home to drive her to the Infirmary for a look at by the nurses. Knowing her luck, the fuckers would insist on keeping her in overnight for friggng observation—stupid, silly fucking people at the Diabetic Clinic, however much of a grand job they professed to do. But they got paid for it! No, she didn't need to be molly-coddled and fussed over like an invalid, somebody in desperate need of close attention.

Fuck, the perils of being diabetic.

However, young and pretty red-haired Lucinda knew the big explosion she heard (like most of the west), had inflicted injury upon the landscape, something much more violent than a mere tremor in the ground, as well as the abstract hue to the skies above.

Looking skywards, she saw the faces of The Damned, The Dispossessed and The Killer Ghosts and Gods of Hell. Their chalk-white, sallow faces devoid of blood, leered across to eclipse the sun, making way for something yet more sinister, nostrils flaring and faces grinning as they greedily inhaled the scent of radioactivity, drifting upwards into the ether to assault their senses further and bring new sinew and flesh to their rubber-like features.

Lucinda reached out a hand to feel the pink blossom bush arced across her body, bringing a branch lower so that she could smell its pungency, its raw sweet ember.

However, she was lying on grass no more. The Gods of Hell had erased all sense of comfort, irrevocably replacing it with biting shards of glass, shifting glass that assaulted Lucinda Peavey and devoured her limbs. The skies became less blue and turned greener as yet again another explosion rang out, shaking the ground. The rubber-like faces, as well as their pale chalky claws, loomed like clownish caricatures. Their hands emerged from behind the darkening spectrum now, reaching down towards Hall Wood, in particular to the place where a tortured, bleeding Lucinda lay.

Amazing it was, how a liquid fiery and poisonous both to organism and atmosphere alike could become the creator of new life and summon once latent terrors that once lived and loved amongst us, since deceased but now apparently striving to exist again. Yet, exist in a more spiritually heightened state, grandiose in their newfound lair in the skies, malevolent, murderous, evil and callous. Now, these ghosts strove to enhance the suffering of those beneath, whose company they once kept.

It seemed The Dead and Long Departed had bypassed every humane compulsion and simply desired to recruit to their ranks. They were here now, and yes, many in this polluted, virus-ridden world would be held to account for their sins. Not just this delirious, dying girl Lucinda, who was struggling to hold her breath and regulate her heart-rate under the ongoing assault amongst the blossoms, still smelling so sweet, something the Hellish Ones could never vanquish.

It was the unconquerable diabetes killing Lucinda Peavey and in one of those light-bulb moments familiar to Lucinda, she recognised this fact. She set about devising a plan before her full expiry date came. She could turn this shit around. She knew soon, she would be dead and become one of those fuckers causing chaos below (another explosion occurred, and Lucinda heard the cars, trucks and buses colliding and the screams of passengers on the roads nearby), and leave Hall Wood and this world forever.

As she gulped her last...

...Lucinda reached out her arms, amongst the blood, her flesh flayed, her disfigured face no

longer recognisable, her lips and nose shredded...

...And mustered her final scream!

The shards projected through the atmosphere to the demonic forces' discontent, in one final jangling rattle. The glass ascended from the planet surface and headed skywards towards those dead rubber faces. Desperately, they pawed and clawed as their faces were sliced and gouged and their devil-blood spurted. As they opened their mouths to scream and protest, the shards entered, slicing gums, teeth and throat, silencing the devils once and for all, so they could shrill nevermore.

Yet shrill, they did...

And, in their indignation, shrilled they did indeed as they mourned a plan gone wrong, as the population of the polluted world picked themselves up and carried on, into an era where road-sweepers were paid double-time for their effort...

THE END



Available from [Amazon](#).

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THE GOD WORM by Rob Bliss

Daniel Fitz was plugged in.

He would labour intensely on priorities, but let much of the rest of the rest of his life slide. To look at him through the small locked and barred window high up the basement wall, an outside voyeur would see a slob of a man—a haemorrhage of flesh in a plaid shirt and knee-faded jeans that had been given a name and a social security number and was, therefore, called human. But they wouldn't know the hard work Fitz had shown in choosing his leather recliner with the mini-fridge in one arm, and the way the foot assembly was designed to rock and sway the sitter. Chair as cradle. Man in his den, spurning sunlight, become nocturnal to avoid his fellow man, crickets chirping night silence, the odd car passing on the dirt road, manure rising from the farmer's fields but dampened by the cool night air.

The television was the twenty-four hour world, and it was 102 inches of flatscreen against the wood-panelled wall, blocking all but the two bookend disciples of Christ woven into the age-faded hook-rug of the Last Supper made fifty years earlier by his deceased grandmother.

Daniel had developed an unwritten, unpublished theory that high-definition television had been created and forced on the world by actors and actresses who had become uglier the bigger the television screens expanded. Their pores were pixels, and digital technology was needed for exfoliation. The pretty were shown for their true ugliness and every boob tube was a mirror for a million Dorian Greys.

But like other sedentary mammals, Daniel couldn't get out of the recliner to fetch a pen to record his genius. The television owned his intelligence, and he was fine with that. They told him what to eat and why his food was killing him, let him know who his enemies and friends were each week, got him interested in other people's divorces, pregnancies, crimes, addictions, and who made their long flowing gowns. The television was god and philosophy and demon and mother. Strangers thousands of miles away were his family members. They were real people, therefore anyone who came to the door or phoned was not real; they were intruders trying to get into his den via non-televised methods. If he could've still felt his feet—bloated and red with skin shredding slowly in thick white flakes—then he would've stood up and left the house and bought a gun. Or ordered one through the TV and met the delivery man at the front door. Wherever that was.

“Good evening, and welcome to the ten-thirty news. I'm Brock Nipple—Cassie Stuppengruber has the night off. Our top story—”

Ten-thirty? Fitz scanned the panelled walls for a clock, sure there had once been a plastic 7-Up clock that made a quiet whirr as the red second hand circumnavigated the face of time. It had hung somewhere once, though perhaps it was a clock from his childhood. How many clocks had he ever owned, or seen on walls housing him? Ten-thirty seemed late. Or early.

“Our top story ... Mexican bandits have decapitated the Rat Pack and left their severed heads in Madame Tussaud's House of Wax. A special entry fee will be charged. The bandits escaped six-

gun justice on horseback, their satchels full of high-grade cocaine donated by the Ronald Reagan library for the Advancement of the Psychically Dispossessed. Donations are encouraged. Cassie—oh right, she's off."

The converter was a touch-screen tablet in roughly the shape of a two-dimensional peanut. Fitz's greasy fingerprints were all over it, and the sweat of his wrist imprinted permanent rainbows on its lower zinc oxide surface. He changed channels so adeptly that it appeared as though his hand spasmed and twitched and his middle finger jittered on the touch screen like a fly on its back, dying in a pool of nail polish remover.

A woodpecker finger changed channels at blurring speed. Fitz had the supreme package of just over 2000 channels, many of them redundant, and a good handful from countries where English was verboten. The twitching wrist stopped at a channel out of the Philippines, on a commercial for a soap opera, but fading back to two newscasters, male and female. A picture of the Pope smiled on the back wall between them.

"And we are back," the male anchor said in a language Fitz could understand. Possibly English. "Our top story—bandits scaled a wall in Southern Fiji today with their burros stuffed with high-grade methamphetamine much to the confusion of local law enforcement enthusiasts."

The female anchor slid her wheeled chair across the Pope to slap the cheek of her fellow anchor. He stopped reporting, held a hand to his burning face, revealed a pinkie fingernail painted red, then let himself be kissed on the mouth by the lady newscaster. Kissed hard and with passion.

Fitz felt a tickle at his wrist. Turned his hand palm-up to unstick fingerprints from zinc, and saw a tiny white worm with black triangular teeth hanging from a chewed hole between his wrist ligaments. No blood. The worm chewed the air, its nasal membranes located in its phallic red tongue.

From under twisted eyebrows, Daniel Fitz's eyes focused on the living thing that had emerged from his body. A part of him was not surprised, always having a deep-seated feeling that something—a thing, real, alive, breathing and eating—living inside himself. The proof for this feeling, he told himself long ago, was that outside of his body there was nothing but numbness and stagnant air. Life was a perpetual haemorrhage of misery and boredom, therefore there was no reason for himself or any human being to exist.

There must be a life inside, worth a godly or evolutionary creation.

Many channels on the TV discounted god (and many reinforced many gods), but the problem was evolution. Why did it exist? Why did a planet grow life like a three-day-old shadow instead of remaining a lump of rock or ball of gas? Most planets were lumps of inert matter; did the mere fact of the Earth growing life—a cosmic incubator, an aberration—mean that some form of god existed?

If so, then reason demanded that some higher species lived within homo sapien sapiens.

And here it was. God, the worm.

Daniel nodded and managed to move his lips, chalk-white outside, shiny and wet inside. “Hi,” he said to the worm.

“Hello, Fitz,” the God Worm replied.

It spoke. Somehow, Daniel knew it would. A terrible spark of instinct flashed through his brain telling him to swat it. He ignored his instinct. Instead, he kept up his end of the dialogue the only way he knew how.

“You’re a womb—I mean, a worm.”

“No I’m not—you are.”

The worm had countered his linear logic, making Daniel’s eyebrows wrinkle into tighter spiked snakes. Its obtuse retort had won the argument, so the human being in the chair—a hell of a man—kept mum and let his god do all the talking.

“You are the worm of the Apple,” the white thing said. “Do I make myself clear?” Fitz couldn’t respond, so further explanation was, perhaps, needed. “The Apple in Eden, Mother Nature, Evolution, the Natural Order, the Quantum Flux of Dark Energy otherwise known as God.” The black mouth gaped in a smile and the tiny tongue quivered. “And you are the worm,” it emphasized.

Fitz swallowed and black stubble rolled over his Adam’s apple. A layer of fresh sweat rose off his skin to stick to old perspiration. His nostrils shone. He nodded at the worm.

“Okay. Gotcha.”

“Good. Now, as I’m sure you can guess, no god appears to his creation without demanding obedience. And this we do by forcing you to perform a task.”

“We?”

The worm reared like a cobra and swayed over the twisted double-helix of Fitz’s lifeline. “Yes, we. There are many gods, but we don’t talk theology, so you can put a cork in it right there. Only worms debate our nature and number—we exist and explain diddily-squat. Get it? Good. Now, your mission.”

Electric colours from the television—a channel changing itself without the influence of twitches, each commercial flashing images and texts at epileptic speeds—died the worm. Its pale body grew rainbows, each hue bleeding through a range of itself—how many shades of red, in and out of pink and orange before becoming a blue that was also indigo and black with shades of green and yellow at the fringes. Colours came in washes and lines and dots that spread like a virus, and in the movement of line and shade, Fitz saw faces morph along the body of the god.

The most prevalent being, of course, a death's head. The greatest subliminal image occurring both naturally and artificially in nature and in the fabricated arts of Man. Every god exposes and advertises its skull and bones. Eye holes: two caves parallel—the vagina and anus, birth and resurrection, Alpha and Omega, Us versus Them, Yin and Yang, the Father and Holy Ghost with the Son as the taint ... or is the Ghost the tractless space of the Unknown?

The worm's phantasmagoria shone against the mirrors of Daniel's glassy night-time eyes. Iris and pupil camouflaged behind advertisements for diamond glitter toothpaste, 'Oiled Fur' hair dye, geriatric staircase chairs, mortgage financing, sports patriotism, spicy broiled Szechuan pork, blackhead removers, community college scrolling careers, and the ever-necessary question "It's eleven o'clock—do you know where your children are?"

Daniel Fitz's children still swam in his testicles, but there was more than one way to give birth.

The worm saw the glare in his disciple's eyes and repeated, "Your mission is to infiltrate your species through their ubiquitous medium of mass hypnosis, and spawn my species into their flesh cocoons."

"How come why?" Fitz asked, mimicking the lips of the child on screen who was being threatened with a flu shot.

The worm sighed, though expected the question. There was no such species that created gods but who could not refrain from questions. Theory held that without questions there could be no gods—that the prayer and singing and lamenting voices of bald apes rang notes out of the music of the spheres, and these notes gathered form in the shape of gods. If human beings ever stopped praying, all gods would vanish.

Just a theory. Ridiculous.

The talking worm swam in quantum colouring and answered, "Because I said so, that's why. There has to be a balance of power. With the human population at so many billions, there has to be a proportionate number of gods. Or else one or two gods will get too many followers and become non-temporal states of fascism. When a religion goes guerrilla—look out! Wars birthed and dead and resurrected in a matter of hours, blending, changing sides, moving from enemy to friend to friendly enemy. Only an explosion of new gods can stop Mankind from turning religion into battle strategy."

Made sense. Fitz drooled as he nodded, felt his molars pulse, had to pee, wished the arm cooler of his chair wasn't out of beer.

"Now go, Daniel Fitz—you must save the world by impregnating the brains of the braindead with lots of me."

Black iron teeth grew in Fitz's mouth, pushing out his lips, the hinges of his jaw expanding to wedge out from either side of his face, mandible enlarged to accommodate the zigzag triangular

teeth that meshed to a perfect seal and which had a p.s.i. bite of ten times that of a great white pit-bull. His head sagged forward, but his neck muscles would soon accommodate the extra dimensions of the jaw.

High up on the wall, a knock sounded at the small double-paned window. A man with a visored cap which bore the phrase “Speedy Delivery” peered through the mildewed murk of the glass and smiled down into the basement while squeezing his visor in a salute of greeting.

“Mr. Fitz?” came a voice muted by the sealed glass, as though under water. “Mr. Daniel Fitz? I’m with Speedy Delivery delivery service. Our drone was shot down by a rivalry delivery company. I have the gun you ordered from Channel 1042. I just need your signature.”

A clipboard with a thick pad of thin-papered multi-coloured forms appeared beside the man’s smiling face, a wooden corner of the clipboard tapping the glass.

Daniel’s neck muscles strained as he turned his heavy jaw toward the man in the window. A tinge of pain shot into his wrist. His head swivelled and drooped to see that the worm had taken a bite out of his flesh.

Chewing before a swallow, the worm ordered: “Concentrate, Fitz! There is no exterior world for you to inhabit anymore. You’ve spent a lifetime in this room, this chair. I offer you freedom. Freedom to gnaw and gnash and spread my species throughout the 2000 channel galaxy. Now go!”

The voice gave a counter-offer, diminished through the thick glass: “A bullet, Mr. Fitz. A nice quick bullet and then the Great Sleep. Think of all your television and film heroes who enjoy the Sleep. Mitzi Gaynor! Carroll O’Connor! Romy Schneider! The bullet is quick—that’s Speedy Delivery’s guarantee!”

Daniel hadn’t turned his weighty gaze to the window one last time. Instead, the television caught his eyes as its electric colours swirled down to a black singularity. He raised his arms into a swimmer’s dive. The worm wiggled out of its bloody hole and leapt onto the chair arm as its host was sucked into the televised world of high-def.

A Dallas/Fort Worth weatherman was showing his television audience the high pressure ridge that was slowly sweeping across the state, soon to drop unseasonal climate change rains on the city. He stood in front of a blank green screen and looked to his left to see what only the audience could see. It was how he saw his attacker.

A beast of a man with an immense black steel trap for a mouth dissolved out of a map of Texas with a roar of synthesized vocals. A blue web of skittering electricity shed off his flesh just before he sank his steel fangs into the back of the weatherman’s head, shearing off half an ear.

The man kept talking, and his hand jerked toward the off-screen monitor convulsively. Molasses

saliva ran from his mouth, pushed out with each babbling nonsense syllable.

“Baa baa storm frone gov swee ray ... come down wash it all away.”

Swaying on his feet, the hand holding the monitor remote wand jabbed in all directions, following an elusive moving storm. Pushed out on the splashes of saliva were tiny white worms curled into themselves, black mouths sucking in liquid. They pooled on the floor and quickly incubated, lengthened, began to crawl.

In the concave bite that took off a quarter of the back of the man’s head, worms amassed. They nipped off pieces of cranium—bone and vein and grey matter—and grew. Soon, every natural hole in the man’s head sprouted wriggling worm bouquets.

“We’re experiencing technical difficulties,” spoke the male anchor as his female partner tried to demurely cup the vomit that spat from her mouth. “Please stand by,” the anchor said without seeing the blanket of worms rising up the front of the news desk.

The stiff limbs of the weatherman pushed him toward the female anchor. He had always had a crush on her, but knew nothing would ever happen because he was just a weatherman. She saw him as loveable and harmless, therefore, not manly.

The worms would give him his revenge.

Fitz slipped back through the state of Texas, the storm front erasing his singularity exit.

“And we are back with The Slice, who has made the transition from TV to film—a new movie coming out this Friday—tell us about it!”

The talk show host leaned on elbows as a man in his twenties with darkly tanned skin, a greased black pompadour, gold chains on his wrists, baggy silk shorts and a football jersey that glittered told the studio audience about his role in “Bringin’ It!”, a sex romp comedy that took place in the hood of the east side of Newark.

Two out of three of the studio cameras captured the one-sided interview. But the third showed a black screen that soon erupted in blue static.

Members of the studio audience gasped and screamed, though most thought the man who had emerged from the camera lens was part of the show.

Until he lumbered into the stands where the audience sat and began biting heads and arms and ribcages with the speed of a piranha. The audience tried to escape, toppling over rows of seats, crushing each other beneath broken heels and brand-name running shoes. The elderly and weak were easy targets, wailing in pain and abandonment as the black jaws approached.

The interview was paused. Host and guest scanned the stands, wondering why the audience wasn't listening to the special guest, looking to crew members for answers. Someone was going to get fired. The Slice wasn't happy, and instantly considered calling his family's lawyers to hash out the possibilities of suing the host and the show. He'd "shut it down, hard" (his catch-phrase on 'Bringin' It').

The host was heard to yell, "Five-second delay! Why isn't it saving us?"

A skin of worms undulated over fallen audience members, flowed out of the stands and washed up and over the cameras. Only glimpses of the show proper could be seen through the camera's eyes, showing millions of white bodies with tiny black teeth heading toward the diamond-sprayed high-top sneakers of The Slice. He leapt onto the chair as he yelled about lawsuits just before the show snapped to black.

Miami. Atlantic whitecaps curled into shore. Girls in bikinis, men in Speedos, played beach volleyball or sat on lounges to smear their limbs with oil and cream. Background, roll sound.

In the foreground stood a podium holding a clutch of microphones that recorded the words of the Union Head who was threatening a postal strike. He had purposely not shaved in order to show how hard he had been negotiating, and how draining it was to be living in a pre-paid five-star hotel room with a top-notch room service menu, and not being home with his wife and kids.

"All we want is fair and equitable pay structures, pension packages, and lifetime job security. Isn't that what every hard-working American deserves? Why is management trying to deny us our basic human rights? We will fight until our demands are met—and I will not comment on those factions who have accused the union of employing terroristic tactics. This is not terrorism—this is the Teamsters, goddamnit!"

Despite the poor presentation of saying "goddamnit" on live television, no TV station censored the word, and the Union Head made no retraction.

Over his right shoulder, a man pointed his cell phone at two girls who toasted their non-fat lattes and cheered and displayed the intricacies of their miniscule bikinis to the phone camera's eye.

A man attached to a wedge of black teeth dove out of the phone and dropped across both girls. Their screams were cut short, half of one's face bitten off, the breast (of course) of the other gouged out and chewed by the steel.

Worms grew in the wounds.

The man with the phone had his legs bitten off up to the knees. Worms swam up into the gaping, bleeding holes and rolled under the skin like pebbles, heading for the cameraman's head. His body writhed from the movement of the parasites inside him as he lay on the sand, the cell phone filming the sky.

At first, no one at the news conference saw the background attack, but soon all cameras swept away from the Union Head, and microphones were plucked from the podium. Newscasters ran toward the fluorescent bikinis and shining blood, mistaking the thickening worms for white sand.

The man with the black teeth slipped back through the cell phone camera, but soon appeared in other cameras, many of them live-streaming, all attached by internet social media websites.

Daniel Fitz travelled around the world multiple times, his path scratched over the globe like cracks in ancient ice. Moving at the speed of light, his travels didn't take long, and the worms did most of the work, taking over the devastation which he began.

Eventually, he returned to his chair, and watched the world in chaos on his television. The God Worm nestled back into his wrist and told him, "You are my son. I am well-pleased."

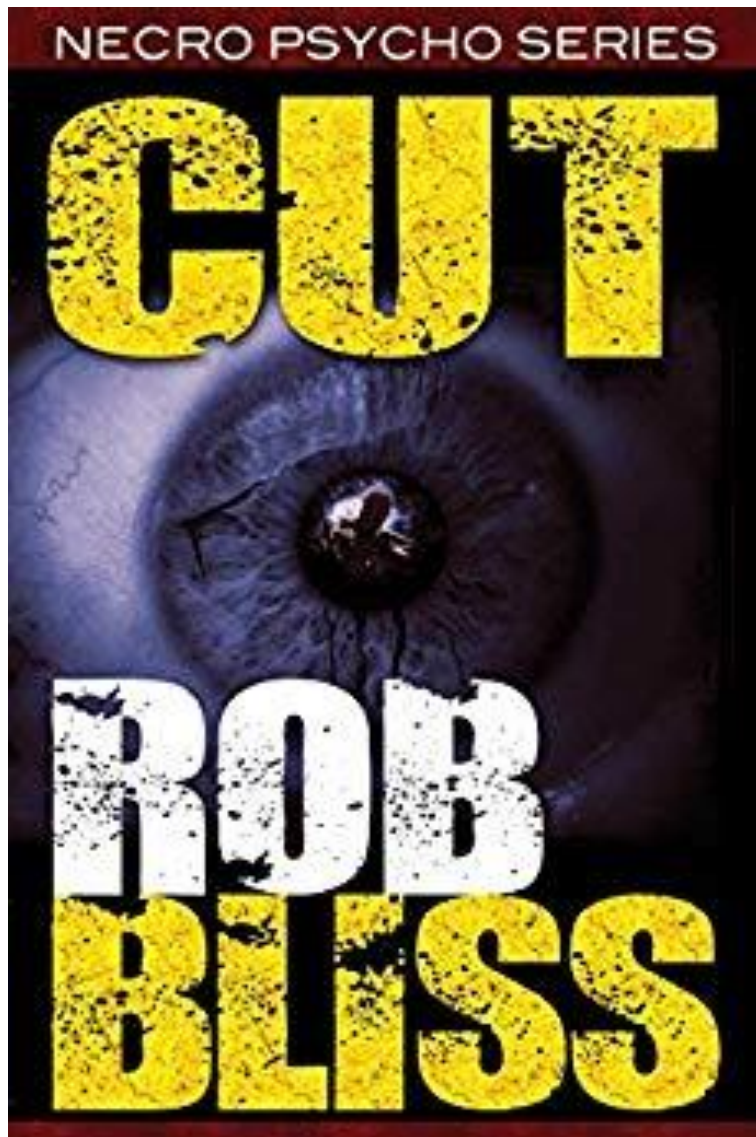
He put the TV on mute as channels flipped of their own accord, and reclined the chair all the way back. Needed to rest his exhausted neck and jaw muscles.

Eyes wandering to the high window, he saw the gun leaning against the glass, the delivery man deciding to forego a signature. The window so high, the glass so thick ...

Daniel Fitz closed his eyes and slept and the worms allowed him to dream that he was dead.

THE END

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Forty-Seven

With those final words, Turhan Mot left the fighting field. The instant he was gone, the guards and the workmen turned on Ward and attacked.

Armed with laser pistols set to kill, the twelve guards and workmen found their overpowering advantage to become instantly something of a considerable disadvantage. None of them wished to shoot any of their companions, and the guards all realized simultaneously that they couldn't take a shot at Ward without risking that very chance.

In the half-minute it took the twelve guards to appreciate and adapt to how very profoundly the balance of power had changed, Ward had already acted.

Ward and Lacey stood on the plasma wall that separated them from the audience. Below his feet, Ward could plainly see the faces of the cheering, chanting crowds. They stretched upwards in the distance, until they disappeared behind the labyrinthine contraption of flaming, electrified cages filling the centre of the fighting field.

The twelve guards and workmen formed a dome around them, surrounding Ward and Lacey on all sides on the plasma wall, and in the air above them. They bumbled into each other as they aimed their pistols at Ward. Their compunction against possibly hitting one of their companions made their aim very clumsy.

Of course, Ward had no such compunction. Here, everyone, with the exception of Lacey, maybe, was a target for his pistol. Ward could shoot freely. Which he would soon do.

First he needed a pistol. Taking advantage of the guards' momentary confusion, Ward pushed off from the plasma wall on which he and everyone else were standing.

Grabbing Lacey by both wrists, he swung the girl in a wide circle around him, cutting through the guards and knocking them in heaps like so many bowling pins. Lacey, startled, squealed, filling the air with a sharp, short shriek.

Ward grinned. He always gloated when he pulled this amusing stunt. He'd learned it, studying ballet and ice skating on those long hauls between Mars and the asteroids. Carter Ward always kept an eye out for any moves he could use.

Pistols flew from startled hands, and Ward wasted not a second snapping up as many as he could, which was three.

Lacey shook herself free and stumbled to the plasma field. She turned to glare at Ward, who was busy firing off six quick shots from a plasma pistol he snatched from the air. Two shots, lasting several seconds each, until the charge ran down. Ward ran the beam across the faces of four of the guards, blinding two of them.

“Hey! ... you!” Lacey began, now she was back on her feet. She was about to complain to Ward about his rude and unexpected treatment of her when he cut her off. Pushing a laser pistol into her hand, he demanded in a rough, hoarse voice, “Yuh know what this is?”

Ward fired off another shot while Lacey answered. He hit another of the guards, burning a hole through the man’s cheeks.

“Ye-es,” Lacey answered.

The wounded man flailed helplessly, kicking into several of his companions and confounding their movements.

“Good,” Ward said. “Shoot.”

Again, Ward grabbed Lacey by the wrist

Lacey fired into the mass of guards and workmen while Ward pushed off from the plasma wall again. By this time, the guards who were not yet wounded scrambled to find their laser pistols.

They fired after Ward and Lacey. Scalding blue beams shot past them.

“This way!” Ward said, grabbing Lacey by the wrist. He leaped toward the contraption of cages and traps, dragging Lacey with him.

Ward felt the first beam cut through his thigh. The second hit him in the arm. Both left him with deep burns gouging troughs into his flesh. The stench of charred flesh filled his nostrils.

“Dammit!” Ward grunted.

Ward leaped again, dragging Lacey with him. Lacey, remembering Ward’s command to ‘Shoot!’, fired into the cluster of guards and workmen (now cut down to seven men from the original twelve who stood guard while Ward was scrubbed down for the arena).

Lacey’s shots all went wild, but they were sufficient to confound the guards and the workmen. Ward’s leap carried him and Lacey nearly sixty feet across the killing field. Cheers from the crowds underfoot, and surrounding them, and overhead all resounded through the arena.

Just as he and Lacey—still firing wildly—were sailing past the labyrinthine construction that dominated the centre of the killing field, Ward seized hold of a bar of one of the cages, and swung Lacey and himself about.

Ward thrust his body about, in time to see four of the guards leaping high and hard to catch up. Four shots, one each, each after the other, with the cold precision of a machine hit the men squarely in the face, burning a hole the width of a pencil through their heads.

Nine down now. Three left.

No. As Ward watched, eight more men, and women, stormed into the killing field from one of the entrances. Horns played. Drums were fast and loud. Crowds roared. They beat their feet and caused huge vibrations to shake.

Yanking Lacey by the elbow, he dragged her into an opening that allowed them to find at least a momentary shelter.

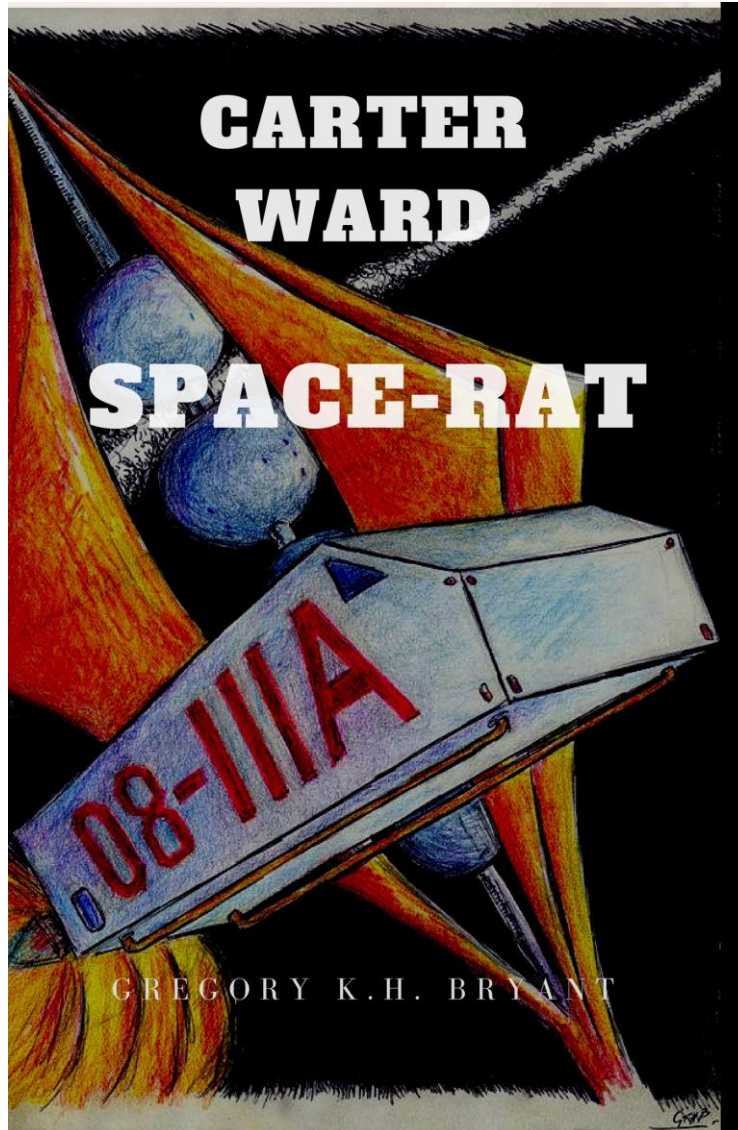
“Now what?” Lacey asked, staring at Ward, her eyes wide and her chest breathing hard.

Ward tossed a quick glance behind him, then shrugged his shoulders at Lacey.

“Dunno, babe. Got any ideas?”

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ERIC BRIGHTYES by H Rider Haggard

VII: How Eric Went Up Mosfell against Skallagrim the Baresark

Now Atli the Good, earl of the Orkneys, comes into the story.

It chanced that Atli had sailed to Iceland in the autumn on a business about certain lands that had fallen to him in right of his mother Helga, who was an Icelfander, and he had wintered west of Reyjanes. Spring being come, he wished to sail home, and, when his ship was bound, he put to sea full early in the year. But it chanced that bad weather came up from the south-east, with mist and rain, so he must needs beach his ship in a creek under shelter of the Westman Islands.

Now Atli asked what people dwelt in these parts, and, when he heard the name of Asmund Asmundson the Priest, he was glad, for in old days he and Asmund had gone many a viking cruise together.

“We will leave the ship here,” he said, “till the weather clears, and go up to Middalhof to stay with Asmund.”

So they made the ship snug, and left men to watch her; but two of the company, with Earl Atli, rode up to Middalhof.

It must be told of Atli that he was the best of the earls who lived in those days, and he ruled the Orkneys so well that men gave him a by-name and called him Atli the Good. It was said of him that he had never turned a poor man away unsuccoured, nor bowed his head before a strong man, nor drawn his sword without cause, nor refused peace to him who prayed it. He was sixty years old, but age had left few marks on him, except that of his long white beard. He was keen-eyed, and well-fashioned of form and face, a great warrior and the strongest of men. His wife was dead, leaving him no children, and this was a sorrow to him; but as yet he had taken no other wife, for he would say: “Love makes an old man blind,” and “When age runs with youth, both shall fall,” and again, “Mix grey locks and golden and spoil two heads.” For this earl was a man of many wise sayings.

Now Atli came to Middalhof just as men sat down to meat and, hearing the clatter of arms, all sprang to their feet, thinking that perhaps Ospakar had come again as he had promised. But when Asmund saw Atli he knew him at once, though they had not met for nearly thirty years, and he greeted him lovingly, and put him in the high seat, and gave place to his men upon the cross-benches. Atli told all his story, and Asmund bade him rest a while at Middalhof till the weather grew clearer.

Now the Earl saw Swanhild and thought the maid wondrous fair, and so indeed she was, as she moved scornfully to and fro in her kirtle of white. Soft was her curling hair and deep were her dark blue eyes, and bent were her red lips as is a bow above her dimpled chin, and her teeth shone like pearls.

“Is that fair maid thy daughter, Asmund,” asked Atli.

“She is named Swanhild the Fatherless,” he answered, turning his face away.

“Well,” said Atli, looking sharply on him, “were the maid sprung from me, she would not long be called the ‘Fatherless,’ for few have such a daughter.”

“She is fair enough,” said Asmund, “in all save temper, and that is bad to cross.”

“In every sword a flaw,” answers Atli; “but what has an old man to do with young maids and their beauty?” and he sighed.

“I have known younger men who would seem less brisk at bridals,” said Asmund, and for that time they talked no more of the matter.

Now, Swanhild heard something of this speech, and she guessed more; and it came into her mind that it would be the best of sport to make this old man love her, and then to mock him and say him nay. So she set herself to the task, as it ever was her wont, and she found it easy. For all day long, with downcast eyes and gentle looks, she waited upon the Earl, and now, at his bidding, she sang to him in a voice soft and low, and now she talked so wisely well that Atli thought no such maid had trod the earth before. But he checked himself with many learned saws, and on a day when the weather had grown fair, and they sat alone, he told her that his ship was bound for Orkney Isles.

Then, as though by chance, Swanhild laid her white hand in his, and on a sudden looked deep into his eyes, and said with trembling lips, “Ah, go not yet, lord!—I pray thee, go not yet!”—and, turning, she fled away.

But Atli was much moved, and he said to himself: “Now a strange thing is come to pass: a fair maid loves an old man; and yet, methinks, he who looks into those eyes sees deep waters,” and he beat his brow and thought.

But Swanhild in her chamber laughed till the tears ran from those same eyes, for she saw that the great fish was hooked and now the time had come to play him.

For she did not know that it was otherwise fated.

Gudruda, too, saw all these things and knew not how to read them, for she was of an honest mind, and could not understand how a woman may love a man as Swanhild loved Eric and yet make such play with other men, and that of her free will. For she guessed little of Swanhild’s guilefulness, nor of the coldness of her heart to all save Eric; nor of how this was the only joy left to her: to make a sport of men and put them to grief and shame. Atli said to himself that he would watch this maid well before he uttered a word to Asmund, and he deemed himself very cunning, for he was wondrous cautious after the fashion of those about to fall. So he set himself to watching, and Swanhild set herself to smiling, and he told her tales of warfare and of daring, and she clasped her hands and said:

“Was there ever such a man since Odin trod the earth?” And so it went on, till the serving-women laughed at the old man in love and the wit of her that mocked him.

Now upon a day, Eric having made an end of sowing his corn, bethought himself of his vow to go up alone against Skallagrim the Baresark in his den on Mosfell over by Hecla. Now, this was a heavy task: for Skallagrim was held so mighty among men that none went up against him anymore; and at times Eric thought of Gudruda, and sighed, for it was likely that she would be a widow before she was made a wife. Still, his oath must be fulfilled, and, moreover, of late Skallagrim having heard that a youngling named Eric Brighteyes had vowed to slay him single-handed, had made a mock of him in this fashion. For Skallagrim rode down to Coldback on Ran River and at night-time took a lamb from the fold. Holding the lamb beneath his arm, he drew near to the house and smote thrice on the door with his battle-axe, and they were thundering knocks. Then he leapt on to his horse and rode off a space and waited. Presently Eric came out, but half clad, a shield in one hand and Whitefire in the other, and, looking, by the bright moonlight he saw a huge black-bearded man seated on a horse, having a great axe in one hand and the lamb beneath his arm.

“Who art thou?” roared Eric.

“I am called Skallagrim, youngling,” answered the man on the horse. “Many men have seen me once, none have wished to see me twice, and some few have never seen aught again. Now, it has been echoed in my ears that thou hast vowed a vow to go up Mosfell against Skallagrim the Baresark, and I am come hither to say that I will make thee right welcome. See,” and with his axe he cut off the lamb’s tail on the pommel of his saddle: “of the flesh of this lamb of thine I will brew broth and of his skin I will make me a vest. Take thou this tail, and when thou fittest it on to the skin again, Skallagrim will own a lord,” and he hurled the tail towards him.

“Bide thou there till I can come to thee,” shouted Eric; “it will spare me a ride to Mosfell.”

“Nay, nay. It is good for lads to take the mountain air,” and Skallagrim turned his horse away, laughing.

Eric watched Skallagrim vanish over the knoll, and then, though he was very angry, laughed also and went in. But first he picked up the tail, and on the morrow he skinned it.

Now the time was come when the matter must be tried, and Eric bade farewell to Saevuna his mother, and Unna his cousin, and girt Whitefire round him and set upon his head a golden helm with wings on it. Then he found the byrnie which his father Thorgrimur had stripped, together with the helm, from that Baresark who cut off his leg—and this was a good piece, forged of the Welshmen—and he put it on his breast, and taking a stout shield of bull’s hide studded with nails, rode away with one thrall, the strong carle named Jon.

But the women misdoubted them much of this venture; nevertheless Eric might not be gainsayed.

Now, the road to Mosfell runs past Middalhof and thither he came. Atli, standing at the men’s door, saw him and cried aloud: “Ho! a mighty man comes here.”

Swanhild looked out and saw Eric, and he was a goodly sight in his war-gear. For now, week by week, he seemed to grow more fair and great, as the full strength of his manhood rose in him, like sap in the spring grass, and Gudruda was very proud of her lover. That night Eric stayed at Middalhof, and sat hand in hand with Gudruda and talked with Earl Atli. Now the heart of the old viking went out to Eric, and he took great delight in him and in his strength and deeds, and he longed much that the Gods had given him such a son.

“I prophesy this of thee, Brighteyes,” he cried: “that it shall go ill with this Baresark thou seekest—yes, and with all men who come within sweep of that great sword of thine. But remember this, lad: guard thy head with thy buckler, cut low beneath his shield, if he carries one, and mow the legs from him: for ever a Baresark rushes on, shield up.”

Eric thanked him for his good words and went to rest. But, before it was light, he rose, and Gudruda rose also and came into the hall, and buckled his harness on him with her own hands.

“This is a sad task for me, Eric!” she sighed, “for how do I know that Baresark’s hands shall not loose this helm of thine?”

“That is as it may be, sweet,” he said; “but I fear not the Baresark or any man. How goes it with Swanhild now?”

“I know not. She makes herself sweet to that old Earl and he is fain of her, and that is beyond my sight.”

“I have seen as much,” said Eric. “It will be well for us if he should wed her.”

“Ay, and ill for him; but it is to be doubted if that is in her mind.”

Now Eric kissed her soft and sweet, and went away, bidding her look for his return on the day after the morrow.

Gudruda bore up bravely against her fears till he was gone, but then she wept a little.

Now it is to be told that Eric and his thrall Jon rode hard up Stonefell and across the mountains and over the black sand, till, two hours before sunset, they came to the foot of Mosfell, having Hecla on their right. It is a grim mountain, grey with moss, standing alone in the desert plain; but between it and Hecla there is good grassland.

“Here is the fox’s earth. Now to start him,” said Eric.

He knows something of the path by which this fortress can be climbed from the south, and horses may be ridden up it for a space. So on they go, till at length they come to a flat place where water runs down the black rocks, and here Eric drank of the water, ate food, and washed his face and hands. This done, he bid Jon tend the horses—for hereabouts there is a little grass—and be watchful till he returned, since he must go up against Skallagrim alone. And there with a

doubtful heart Jon stayed all that night. For of all that came to pass he saw but one thing, and that was the light of Whitefire as it flashed out high above him on the brow of the mountain when first Brighteyes smote at foe.

Eric went warily up the Baresark path, for he would keep his breath in him, and the light shone redly on his golden helm. High he went, till at length he came to a pass narrow and dark and hedged on either side with sheer cliffs, such as two armed men might hold against a score. He peered down this path, but he saw no Baresark, though it was worn by Baresark feet. He crept along its length, moving like a sunbeam through the darkness of the pass, for the light gathered on his helm and sword, till suddenly the path turned and he was on the brink of a gulf that seemed to have no bottom, and, looking across and down, he could see Jon and the horses more than a hundred fathoms beneath. Now Eric must stop, for this path leads but into the black gulf. Also he was perplexed to know where Skallagrim had his lair. He crept to the brink and gazed. Then he saw that a point of rock jutted from the sheer face of the cliff and that the point was worn with the mark of feet.

“Where Baresark passes, there may yeoman follow,” said Eric and, sheathing Whitefire, without more ado, though he liked the task little, he grasped the overhanging rock and stepped down on to the point below. Now he was perched like an eagle over the dizzy gulf and his brain swam. Backward he feared to go, and forward he might not, for there was nothing but air. Beside him, growing from the face of the cliff, was a birch-bush. He grasped it to steady himself. It bent beneath his clutch, and then he saw, behind it, a hole in the rock through which a man could creep, and down this hole ran footmarks.

“First through air like a bird; now through earth like a fox,” said Eric and entered the hole. Doubling his body till his helm almost touched his knee he took three paces and lo! he stood on a great platform of rock, so large that a hall might be built on it, which, curving inwards, cannot be seen from the narrow pass. This platform, that is backed by the sheer cliff, looks straight to the south, and from it he could search the plain and the path that he had travelled, and there once more he saw Jon and the horses far below him.

“A strong place, truly, and well chosen,” said Eric and looked around. On the floor of the rock and some paces from him a turf fire still smouldered, and by it were sheep’s bones, and beyond, in the face of the overhanging precipice, was the mouth of a cave.

“The wolf is at home, or was but lately,” said Eric; “now for his lair;” and with that he walked warily to the mouth of the cave and peered in. He could see nothing yet a while, but surely he heard a sound of snoring?

Then he crept in, and, presently, by the red light of the burning embers, he saw a great black-bearded man stretched at length upon a rug of sheepskins, and by his side an axe.

“Now it would be easy to make an end of this cave-dweller,” thought Eric; “but that is a deed I will not do—no, not even to a Baresark—to slay him in his sleep,” and therewith he stepped lightly to the side of Skallagrim, and was about to prick him with the point of Whitefire, when! as he did so, another man sat up behind Skallagrim.

“By Thor! for two I did not bargain,” said Eric, and sprang from the cave.

Then, with a grunt of rage, that Baresark who was behind Skallagrim came out like a she-bear robbed of her whelps, and ran straight at Eric, sword aloft. Eric gives before him right to the edge of the cliff. Then the Baresark smites at him and Brighteyes catches the blow on his shield, and smites at him in turn so well and truly, that the head of the Baresark flies from his shoulders and spins along the ground, but his body, with outstretched arms yet gripping at the air, falls over the edge of the gulf sheer into the water, a hundred fathoms down. It was the flash that Whitefire made as it circled ere it smote that Jon saw while he waited in the dell upon the mountain side. But of the Baresark he saw nothing, for he passed down into the great fire-riven cleft and was never seen more, save once only, in a strange fashion that shall be told. This was the first man whom Brighteyes slew.

Now the old tale tells that Eric cried aloud: “Little chance had this one,” and that then a wonderful thing came to pass. For the head on the rock opened its eyes and answered:

“Little chance indeed against thee, Eric Brighteyes. Still, I tell thee this: that where my body fell there thou shalt fall, and where it lies there thou shalt lie also.”

Now Eric was afraid, for he thought it a strange thing that a severed head should speak to him.

“Here it seems I have to deal with trolls,” he said; “but at the least, though he speak, this one shall strike no more,” and he looked at the head, but it answered nothing.

Now Skallagrim slept through it all and the light grew so dim that Eric thought it time to make an end this way or that. Therefore, he took the head of the slain man, though he feared to touch it, and rolled it swiftly into the cave, saying, “Now, being so glib of speech, go tell thy mate that Eric Brighteyes knocks at his door.”

Then came sounds as of a man rising, and presently Skallagrim rushed forth with axe aloft and his fellow’s head in his left hand. He was clothed in nothing but a shirt and the skin of Eric’s lamb was bound to his chest.

“Where now is my mate?” he said. Then he saw Eric leaning on Whitefire, his golden helm ablaze with the glory of the passing sun.

“It seems that thou holdest somewhat of him in thine hand, Skallagrim, and for the rest, go seek it in yonder rift.”

“Who art thou?” roared Skallagrim.

“Thou mayest know me by this token,” said Eric, and he threw towards him the skin of that lamb’s tail which Skallagrim had lifted from Coldback.

Now Skallagrim knew him and the Baresark fit came on. His eyes rolled, foam flew to his lips,

his mouth grinned, and he was awesome to see. He let fall the head, and, swinging the great axe aloft, rushed at Eric. But Brighteyes is too swift for him. It would not be well to let that stroke fall, and it must go hard with aught it struck. He springs forward, he louts low and sweeps upwards with Whitefire. Skallagrim sees the sword flare and drops almost to his knee, guarding his head with the axe; but Whitefire strikes on the iron half of the axe and shears it in two, so that the axe-head falls to earth. Now the Baresark is weaponless but unharmed, and it would be an easy task to slay him as he rushes by. But it came into Eric's mind that it is an unworthy deed to slay a swordless man, and this came into his mind also, that he desired to match his naked might against a Baresark in his rage. So, in the hardihood of his youth and strength, he cast Whitefire aside, and crying "Come, try a fall with me, Baresark," rushed on Skallagrim.

"Thou art mad," yells the Baresark, and they are at it hard. Now they grip and rend and tear. Ospakar was strong, but the Baresark strength of Skallagrim is more than the strength of Ospakar, and soon Brighteyes thinks longingly on Whitefire that he has cast aside. Eric is mighty beyond the might of men, but he can scarcely hold his own against this mad man, and very soon he knows that only one chance is left to him, and that is to cling to Skallagrim till the Baresark fit be passed and he is once more like other men. But this is easier to tell of than to do, and presently, strive as he will, Eric is on his back, and Skallagrim on him. But still he holds the Baresark as with bands of iron, and Skallagrim may not free his arms, though he strive furiously. Now they roll over and over on the rock, and the gloom gathers fast about them till presently Eric sees that they draw near to the brink of that mighty rift down which the severed head of the cave-dweller has foretold his fall.

"Then we go together," says Eric, but the Baresark does not heed. Now they are on the very brink, and here as it chances, or as the Norns decree, a little rock juts up and this keeps them from falling. Eric is uppermost, and, strive as he will, Skallagrim may not turn him on his back again. Still, Brighteyes' strength may not endure very long, for he grows faint, and his legs slip slowly over the side of the rift till now he clings, as it were, by his ribs and shoulder-blades alone, that rub against the little rock. The light dies away, and Eric thinks on sweet Gudruda and makes ready to die also, when suddenly a last ray from the sun falls on the fierce face of Skallagrim, and lo! Brighteyes sees it change, for the madness goes out of it, and in a moment the Baresark becomes but as a child in his mighty grip.

"Hold!" said Skallagrim, "I crave peace," and he loosed his clasp.

"Not too soon, then," gasped Eric as, drawing his legs from over the brink of the rift, he gained his feet and, staggering to his sword, grasped it very thankfully.

"I am fordone!" said Skallagrim; "come, drag me from this place, for I fall; or, if thou wilt, hew off my head."

"I will not serve thee thus," said Eric. "Thou art a gallant foe," and he put out his hand and drew him into safety.

For a while Skallagrim lay panting, then he gained his hands and knees and crawled to where Eric leaned against the rock.

“Lord,” he said, “give me thy hand.”

Eric stretched forth his left hand, wondering, and Skallagrim took it. He did not stretch out his right, for, fearing guile, he gripped Whitefire in it.

“Lord,” Skallagrim said again, “of all men who ever were, thou art the mightiest. Five other men had not stood before me in my rage, but, scorning thy weapon, thou didst overcome me in the noblest fashion, and by thy naked strength alone. Now hearken. Thou hast given me my life, and it is thine from this hour to the end. Here I swear fealty to thee. Slay me if thou wilt, or use me if thou wilt, but I think it will be better for thee to do this rather than that, for there is but one who has mastered me, and thou art he, and it is borne in upon my mind that thou wilt have need of my strength, and that shortly.”

“That may well be, Skallagrim,” said Eric, “yet I put little trust in outlaws and cave-dwellers. How do I know, if I take thee to me, that thou wilt not murder me in my sleep, as it would have been easy for me to do by thee but now?”

“What is it that runs from thy arm,” asked Skallagrim.

“Blood,” said Eric.

“Stretch out thine arm, lord.”

Eric did so, and the Baresark put his lips to the scratch and sucked the blood, then said:

“In this blood of thine I pledge thee, Eric Brighteyes! May Valhalla refuse me and Hela take me; may I be hunted like a fox from earth to earth; may trolls torment me and wizards sport with me o’ night; may my limbs shrivel and my heart turn to water; may my foes overtake me, and my bones be crushed across the doom-stone—if I fail in one jot from this my oath that I have sworn! I will guard thy back, I will smite thy enemies, thy hearthstone shall be my temple, thy honour my honour. Thrall am I of thine, and thrall I will be, and whiles thou wilt we will live one life, and, in the end, we will die one death.”

“It seems that in going to seek a foe I have found a friend,” said Eric, “and it is likely enough that I shall need one. Skallagrim, Baresark and outlaw as thou art, I take thee at thy word. Henceforth, we are master and man and we will do many a deed side by side, and in token of it I lengthen thy name and call thee Skallagrim Lambstail. Now, if thou hast it, give me food and drink, for I am faint from that hug of thine, old bear.”

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THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

Chapter XXVII: The Coming of Yolara

“Never was there such a girl!” Thus Larry, dreamily, leaning head in hand on one of the wide divans of the chamber where Lakla had left us, pleading service to the Silent Ones.

“An’, by the faith and the honour of the O’Keefes, an’ by my dead mother’s soul may God do with me as I do by her!” he whispered fervently.

He relapsed into open-eyed dreaming.

I walked about the room, examining it—the first opportunity I had gained to inspect carefully any of the rooms in the abode of the Three. It was octagonal, carpeted with the thick rugs that seemed almost as though woven of soft mineral wool, faintly shimmering, palest blue. I paced its diagonal; it was fifty yards; the ceiling was arched, and either of pale rose metal or metallic covering; it collected the light from the high, slitted windows, and shed it, diffused, through the room.

Around the octagon ran a low gallery not two feet from the floor, balustraded with slender pillars, close set; broken at opposite curtained entrances over which hung thick, dull-gold curtainings giving the same suggestion of metallic or mineral substance as the rugs. Set within each of the eight sides, above the balcony, were colossal slabs of lapis lazuli, inset with graceful but unplaceable designs in scarlet and sapphire blue.

There was the great divan on which mused Larry; two smaller ones, half a dozen low seats and chairs carved apparently of ivory and of dull soft gold.

Most curious were tripods, strong, pikelike legs of golden metal four feet high, holding small circles of the lapis with intaglios of one curious symbol somewhat resembling the ideographs of the Chinese.

There was no dust—nowhere in these caverned spaces had I found this constant companion of ours in the world overhead. My eyes caught a sparkle from a corner. Pursuing it I found upon one of the low seats a flat, clear crystal oval, remarkably like a lens. I took it and stepped up on the balcony. Standing on tiptoe I found I commanded from the bottom of a window slit a view of the bridge approach. Scanning it I could see no trace of the garrison there, nor of the green spear flashes. I placed the crystal to my eyes—and with a disconcerting abruptness the cavern mouth leaped before me, apparently not a hundred feet away; decidedly the crystal was a very excellent lens—but where were the guards?

I peered closely. Nothing! But now against the aperture I saw a score or more of tiny, dancing sparks. An optical illusion, I thought, and turned the crystal in another direction. There were no sparklings there. I turned it back again—and there they were. And what were they like?

Realization came to me—they were like the little, dancing, radiant atoms that had played for a time about the emptiness where had stood Sorgar of the Lower Waters before he had been

shaken into the nothingness! And that green light I had noticed—the Keth!

A cry on my lips, I turned to Larry—and the cry died as the heavy curtainings at the entrance on my right undulated, parted as though a body had slipped through, shook and parted again and again—with the dreadful passing of unseen things!

“Larry!” I cried. “Here! Quick!”

He leaped to his feet, gazed about wildly—and disappeared! Yes—vanished from my sight like the snuffed flame of a candle or as though something moving with the speed of light itself had snatched him away!

Then from the divan came the sounds of struggle, the hissing of straining breaths, the noise of Larry cursing. I leaped over the balustrade, drawing my own pistol—was caught in a pair of mighty arms, my elbows crushed to my sides, drawn down until my face pressed close to a broad, hairy breast—and through that obstacle—formless, shadowless, transparent as air itself—I could still see the battle on the divan!

Now there were two sharp reports; the struggle abruptly ceased. From a point not a foot over the great couch, as though oozing from the air itself, blood began to drop, faster and ever faster, pouring out of nothingness.

And out of that same air, now a dozen feet away, leaped the face of Larry—bodyless, poised six feet above the floor, blazing with rage—floating weirdly, uncannily to a hideous degree, in vacancy.

His hands flashed out—armless; they wavered, appearing, disappearing—swiftly tearing something from him. Then there, feet hidden, stiff on legs that vanished at the ankles, striking out into vision with all the dizzy abruptness with which he had been stricken from sight was the O’Keefe, a smoking pistol in hand.

And ever that red stream trickled out of vacancy and spread over the couch, dripping to the floor.

I made a mighty movement to escape; was held more firmly—and then close to the face of Larry, flashing out with that terrifying instantaneousness even as had his, was the head of Yolar, as devilishly mocking as I had ever seen it, the cruelty shining through it like delicate white flames from hell—and beautiful!

“Stir not! Strike not—until I command!” She flung the words beyond her, addressed to the invisible ones who had accompanied her; whose presences I sensed filling the chamber. The floating, beautiful head, crowned high with corn-silk hair, darted toward the Irishman. He took a swift step backward. The eyes of the priestess deepened toward purple; sparkled with malice.

“So,” she said. “So, Larree—you thought you could go from me so easily!” She laughed softly. “In my hidden hand I hold the Keth cone,” she murmured. “Before you can raise the death tube I can smite you—and will. And consider, Larree, if the handmaiden, the choya comes, I can

vanish—so”—the mocking head disappeared, burst forth again—”and slay her with the Keth—or bid my people seize her and bear her to the Shining One!”

Tiny beads of sweat stood out on O’Keefe’s forehead, and I knew he was thinking not of himself, but of Lakla.

“What do you want with me, Yolara?” he asked hoarsely.

“Nay,” came the mocking voice. “Not Yolara to you, Larree—call me by those sweet names you taught me—Honey of the Wild Bee-e-s, Net of Hearts—” Again her laughter tinkled.

“What do you want with me?” his voice was strained, the lips rigid.

“Ah, you are afraid, Larree.” There was diabolic jubilation in the words. “What should I want but that you return with me? Why else did I creep through the lair of the dragon worm and pass the path of perils but to ask you that? And the choya guards you not well.” Again she laughed. “We came to the cavern’s end and, there were her Akka. And the Akka can see us—as shadows. But it was my desire to surprise you with my coming, Larree,” the voice was silken. “And I feared that they would hasten to be first to bring you that message to delight in your joy. And so, Larree, I loosed the Keth upon them—and gave them peace and rest within the nothingness. And the portal below was open—almost in welcome!”

Once more the malignant, silver pealing of her laughter.

“What do you want with me?” There was wrath in his eyes, and plainly he strove for control.

“Want!” the silver voice hissed, grew calm. “Do not Siya and Siyana grieve that the rite I pledged them is but half done—and do they not desire it finished? And am I not beautiful? More beautiful than your choya?”

The fiendishness died from the eyes; they grew blue, wondrous; the veil of invisibility slipped down from the neck, the shoulders, half revealing the gleaming breasts. And weird, weird beyond all telling was that exquisite head and bust floating there in air—and beautiful, sinisterly beautiful beyond all telling, too. So even might Lilith, the serpent woman, have shown herself tempting Adam!

“And perhaps,” she said, “perhaps I want you because I hate you; perhaps because I love you—or perhaps for Lugur or perhaps for the Shining One.”

“And if I go with you?” He said it quietly.

“Then shall I spare the handmaiden—and—who knows?—take back my armies that even now gather at the portal and let the Silent Ones rot in peace in their abode—from which they had no power to keep me,” she added venomously.

“You will swear that, Yolara; swear to go without harming the handmaiden?” he asked eagerly.

The little devils danced in her eyes. I wrenched my face from the smothering contact.

“Don’t trust her, Larry!” I cried—and again the grip choked me.

“Is that devil in front of you or behind you, old man?” he asked quietly, eyes never leaving the priestess. “If he’s in front I’ll take a chance and wing him—and then you scoot and warn Lakla.”

But I could not answer; nor, remembering Yolara’s threat, would I, had I been able.

“Decide quickly!” There was cold threat in her voice.

The curtains toward which O’Keefe had slowly, step by step, drawn close, opened. They framed the handmaiden! The face of Yolara changed to that gorgon mask that had transformed it once before at sight of the Golden Girl. In her blind rage she forgot to cast the occulting veil. Her hand darted like a snake out of the folds; poising itself with the little silver cone aimed at Lakla.

But before it was wholly poised, before the priestess could loose its force, the handmaiden was upon her. Swift as the lithe white wolf hound she leaped, and one slender hand gripped Yolara’s throat, the other the wrist that lifted the quivering death; white limbs wrapped about the hidden ones, I saw the golden head bend, the hand that held the Keth swept up with a vicious jerk; saw Lakla’s teeth sink into the wrist—the blood spurt forth and heard the priestess shriek. The cone fell, bounded toward me; with all my strength I wrenched free the hand that held my pistol, thrust it against the pressing breast and fired.

The clasp upon me relaxed; a red rain stained me; at my feet a little pillar of blood jetted; a hand thrust itself from nothingness, clawed—and was still.

Now Yolara was down, Lakla meshed in her writhings and fighting like some wild mother whose babes are serpent menaced. Over the two of them, astride, stood the O’Keefe, a pike from one of the high tripods in his hand—thrusting, parrying, beating on every side as with a broadsword against poniard-clutching hands that thrust themselves out of vacancy striving to strike him; stepping here and there, always covering, protecting Lakla with his own body even as a caveman of old who does battle with his mate for their lives.

The sword-club struck—and on the floor lay the half body of a dwarf, writhing with vanishments and reappearings of legs and arms. Beside him was the shattered tripod from which Larry had wrenched his weapon. I flung myself upon it, dashed it down to break loose one of the remaining supports, struck in midfall one of the unseen even as his dagger darted toward me! The seat splintered, leaving in my clutch a golden bar. I jumped to Larry’s side, guarding his back, whirling it like a staff; felt it crunch once—twice—through unseen bone and muscle.

At the door was a booming. Into the chamber rushed a dozen of the frog-men. While some guarded the entrances, others leaped straight to us, and forming a circle about us began to strike with talons and spurs at unseen things that screamed and sought to escape. Now here and there about the blue rugs great stains of blood appeared; heads of dwarfs, torn arms and gashed bodies, half occulted, half revealed. And at last the priestess lay silent, vanquished, white body gleaming

with that uncanny—fragmentariness—from her torn robes. Then O’Keefe reached down, drew Lakla from her. Shakily, Yolara rose to her feet. The handmaiden, face still blazing with wrath, stepped before her; with difficulty she steadied her voice.

“Yolara,” she said, “you have defied the Silent Ones, you have desecrated their abode, you came to slay these men who are the guests of the Silent Ones and me, who am their handmaiden—why did you do these things?”

“I came for him!” gasped the priestess; she pointed to O’Keefe.

“Why?” asked Lakla.

“Because he is pledged to me,” replied Yolara, all the devils that were hers in her face. “Because he wooed me! Because he is mine!”

“That is a lie!” The handmaiden’s voice shook with rage. “It is a lie! But here and now he shall choose, Yolara. And if you he choose, you and he shall go forth from here unmolested—for Yolara, it is his happiness that I most desire, and if you are that happiness—you shall go together. And now, Larry, choose!”

Swiftly she stepped beside the priestess; swiftly wrenched the last shreds of the hiding robes from her.

There they stood—Yolara with but the filmiest net of gauze about her wonderful body; gleaming flesh shining through it; serpent woman—and wonderful, too, beyond the dreams even of Phidias—and hell-fire glowing from the purple eyes.

And Lakla, like a girl of the Vikings, like one of those warrior maids who stood and fought for dun and babes at the side of those old heroes of Larry’s own green isle; translucent ivory lambent through the rents of her torn draperies, and in the wide, golden eyes flaming wrath, indeed—not the diabolic flames of the priestess but the righteous wrath of some soul that looking out of paradise sees vile wrong in the doing.

“Lakla,” the O’Keefe’s voice was subdued, hurt, “there is no choice. I love you and only you—and have from the moment I saw you. It’s not easy—this. God, Goodwin, I feel like an utter cad,” he flashed at me. “There is no choice, Lakla,” he ended, eyes steady upon hers.

The priestess’s face grew deadlier still.

“What will you do with me?” she asked.

“Keep you,” I said, “as hostage.”

O’Keefe was silent; the Golden Girl shook her head.

“Well would I like to,” her face grew dreaming; “but the Silent Ones say—no; they bid me let

you go, Yolara—”

“The Silent Ones,” the priestess laughed. “You, Lakla! You fear, perhaps, to let me tarry here too close!”

Storm gathered again in the handmaiden’s eyes; she forced it back.

“No,” she answered, “the Silent Ones so command—and for their own purposes. Yet do I think, Yolara, that you will have little time to feed your wickedness—tell that to Lugur—and to your Shining One!” she added slowly.

Mockery and disbelief rode high in the priestess’s pose. “Am I to return alone—like this?” she asked.

“Nay, Yolara, nay; you shall be accompanied,” said Lakla; “and by those who will guard—and watch—you well. They are here even now.”

The hangings parted, and into the chamber came Olaf and Rador.

The priestess met the fierce hatred and contempt in the eyes of the Norseman—and for the first time lost her bravado.

“Let not him go with me,” she gasped—her eyes searched the floor frantically.

“He goes with you,” said Lakla, and threw about Yolara a swathing that covered the exquisite, alluring body. “And you shall pass through the Portal, not skulk along the path of the worm!”

She bent to Rador, whispered to him; he nodded; she had told him, I supposed, the secret of its opening.

“Come,” he said, and with the ice-eyed giant behind her, Yolara, head bent, passed out of those hangings through which, but a little before, unseen, triumph in her grasp, she had slipped.

Then Lakla came to the unhappy O’Keefe, rested her hands on his shoulders, looked deep into his eyes.

“Did you woo her, even as she said?” she asked.

The Irishman flushed miserably.

“I did not,” he said. “I was pleasant to her, of course, because I thought it would bring me quicker to you, darlin’.”

She looked at him doubtfully; then—

“I think you must have been very—pleasant!” was all she said—and leaning, kissed him

forgivingly straight on the lips. An extremely direct maiden was Lakla, with a truly sovereign contempt for anything she might consider non-essentials; and at this moment I decided she was wiser even than I had thought her.

He stumbled, feet vanishing; reached down and picked up something that in the grasping turned his hand to air.

“One of the invisible cloaks,” he said to me. “There must be quite a lot of them about—I guess Yolara brought her full staff of murderers. They’re a bit shop-worn, probably—but we’re considerably better off with ‘em in our hands than in hers. And they may come in handy—who knows?”

There was a choking rattle at my feet; half the head of a dwarf raised out of vacancy; beat twice upon the floor in death throes; fell back. Lakla shivered; gave a command. The frog-men moved about; peering here and there; lifting unseen folds revealing in stark rigidity torn form after form of the priestess’s men.

Lakla had been right—her Akka were thorough fighters!

She called, and to her came the frog-woman who was her attendant. To her the handmaiden spoke, pointing to the batrachians who stood, paws and forearms melted beneath the robes they had gathered. She took them and passed out—more grotesque than ever, shattering into streaks of vacancies, reappearing with flickers of shining scale and yellow gems as the tattered pennants of invisibility fluttered about her.

The frog-men reached down, swung each a dead dwarf in his arms, and filed, booming triumphantly away.

And then I remembered the cone of the Keth which had slipped from Yolara’s hand; knew it had been that for which her wild eyes searched. But look as closely as we might, search in every nook and corner as we did, we could not find it. Had the dying hand of one of her men clutched it and had it been borne away with them? With the thought Larry and I raced after the scaled warriors, searched everybody they carried. It was not there. Perhaps the priestess had found it, retrieved it swiftly without our seeing.

Whatever was true—the cone was gone. And what a weapon that one little holder of the shaking death would have been for us!

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