

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE
VOL. 12, ISSUE 1
17TH SEPTEMBER
2017

BRAY ROAD REVISITED

BY STEPHEN
HERNANDEZ—
*WHAT IS A WEREWOLF,
ANYWAY?*

**HOLDING THE LINE BY
PAUL LUBACZEWSKI:
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THE NEW CONDITION

BY GARY MURPHY—
*"AND WHAT IS THE
MATTER WITH YOU
TODAY, CONNOR?"*

INTRODUCING: "THEY COME IN THE SNOW"

**PART ONE BY
ELLIS HASTINGS**

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Gregory KH Bryant, Oafish J Rhodes, Ellis Hastings, Jules Verne, H Rider Haggard*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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EDITORIAL

This week, a journalist goes hunting urban myths, a hypochondriac develops a fundamentally horrific new condition, we finish off Paul Lubaczewski's story of the Line Man, and begin a new frontier age horror three parter from Ellis Hastings.

In Hettford, Gary stares into the void. On Callisto, Yamir's subordinates show fear. On Lincoln Island, the colonists search for a cure for Herbert's fever. And in Egypt, Helidore falls captive to the Moslems.

—Gavin Chappell

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BRAY ROAD REVISITED by Stephen Hernandez

Email to the Editor of The Detroit Gazette. 12th May 2014.

Dear Mr. Browning,

I have arrived safely in Elkhorn, Wisconsin. Thanks once again for this opportunity. Although, the case of werewolf sightings along Elkhorn's Bray Road has long been well documented, I really do feel I can add valuable evidence for and against the existence of the so-called Bray Road Beast. I intend to do it in a totally fresh, scientifically- based, unbiased and objective manner. My lodgings are modest, but quite comfortable, and my landlady, Mrs. Gray, is amiable and pleasant company. Please thank Miss. Banks for arranging everything so well.

Mary Wells.

Email to Ms. Wells. 13th May 2014.

Dear Ms. Wells,

I need not remind you that your father is the owner of this periodical, as such, this places you in a somewhat privileged position, and me in a somewhat awkward one. To be perfectly candid I have given you pretty much a hopeless case. No self-respecting journalist on this newspaper would touch it with a barge pole. But I hope it will be a story you can cut your teeth on. It will show you how different the real journalistic world is from that of college theory. Please refer your findings to the sub-editor, Mr. Jones, in future, as he has quite an interest in such things. I must confess that I have a predilection for facts rather than myths.

Harold Browning.

Email to the Sub-Editor of The Detroit Gazette. 14th May 2014.

Dear Mr. Jones,

I know it is unusual for a junior journalist to maintain an ongoing report to someone as high in a newspaper's hierarchy as a sub-editor, but as Mr. Browning will have no doubt informed you this is my first piece of investigative journalism. I need all the help and advice I can get. I am, of course, keeping recordings of my interviews and also my own personal diary for reference. I would appreciate your advice on how to proceed. I conducted my first interview today with a Miss. Anderson. The witness was a firm believer that there was a kind of animal that was part human out there, although, her story coincided more with sightings of the Michigan Dog Man, where she coincidentally hailed from. I have attached a MP3 recording if you fancy listening to it.

Mary Wells.

Email to Ms Wells. 14th May 2014.

Dear Ms. Wells,

Thank you for the recording—very interesting. I am actually very glad to be working with you on this particular story. I see you have done your research well. I have already read some of your notes and after listening to your first interview, I conclude: you handled it very well and are a natural for winking out hidden details (must be in the blood!). My interest, in fact, is somewhat personal. Many years ago, when I was just another hippy undergraduate, my girlfriend, who loved hitching around remote parts of the country, went missing in the vicinity of Elkhorn. Of course, I went looking for her, and that's how I found out about the legend of the Bray Road Beast.

Bray Road was a typical, non-descript rural road. But it just happened to be the last place my Janey was seen. Investigating Janey's disappearance ended up inspiring me to become a journalist. Up to that time, I had my modest sights set on merely becoming an international rock star, (my guitar is still gathering dust in the attic). The one thing that intrigued me most was the correlation between the witnesses' sightings. I wonder if you will discover the same thing after so many years. I gather there have been quite a few recent sightings, apart from the one described by Miss. Anderson. Judging from the first interview the description has not changed that much. Can one creature survive so long? Is there perhaps more of than one, and they are breeding? Or, perhaps, the werewolf legend is true, and those who are bitten and not slaughtered become werewolves themselves.

Lawrence Jones

Mary Wells' diary entry. 14th May 2014.

Of course, all I am doing is treading over old ground, raking up near forgotten memories—not to mention a few fresh ones. There has been so much written about the Bray Road Beast, the Michigan Dogman and also the Windigo, to suggest a hitherto, unknown werewolf-like creature might really exist—but it is a big might.

What is a werewolf, anyway? It is really a European term for a wolf that has got a taste for human flesh. It only took some imaginative writing, the addition of Hollywood movies, and we end up with this legend of men who turn into wolf-like beasts when there is a full moon. There is, of course, a 'clinical' condition known as lycanthropy. It is defined as a rare psychiatric syndrome that involves a delusion that the affected person can transform into, has transformed into, or is a non-human animal. There is also the 'mythical' condition of lycanthropy, a supernatural affliction, in which humans are said to physically shapeshift into wolves.

I am approaching this subject, I must admit, from a cynical point of view. I have never been a real believer in the supernatural. I am more inclined to a scientific explanation. But it is the duty of a true journalist to be unbiased, so I will try my best. I must admit to being excited, though, not just because this is my first case as an investigative journalist, but because Bray Road itself is pretty much the last place I would ever expect to discover a werewolf. It is just

so plain and normal. Totally non-descript, as Mr. Jones pointed out. Nevertheless, it is the main route in and out of Elkhorn.

I guess, I too, have been subliminally influenced by Hollywood movies. I expected some sort of foggy, marshy place accompanied by the distant howls of wolves. It is just a plain old country road, bordered by trees and fields—nothing more.

Cathy May Anderson, was the twenty-something year old who had rekindled the public interest in the Bray Road Beast. She claimed that the Beast had actually chased her to her car. According to the police, who arrived at the scene some ten minutes after the incident (Cathy May had phoned them on her mobile), she was locked in her car and hysterical. It took some time before they could coax her to get out of the vehicle or even unlock her hands from the steering wheel. She is the first person I interviewed, in fact, she is the first person I have ever interviewed on a professional basis. That was earlier today, after I had identified myself to the police and told them of my intentions. I didn't want the police getting the wrong idea about me snooping around their town. But evidently I wasn't the only journalist about. There were quite a few in town because of the fresh sightings. They were mainly from cult magazines and newspapers who devoted themselves to all things weird and wonderful. The duty sergeant had raised his eyebrows slightly on hearing I was from the Detroit Gazette—evidently the Bray Road Beast did not usually attract the attention of the serious press. The desk sergeant smiled at me and said that did I know that Beast sightings were like a virus in Elkhorn? As soon as one person reports something you get a whole stream of them. He shrugged his shoulders and said it would all die down soon enough. But he for one was fed up with answering crank calls.

Cathy May lived on a trailer park just outside town. She was only too willing to talk to me. This was her fifteen minutes of fame, after all. I arranged to meet her there after she had finished her shift at the local diner. I am not being a snob when I say Cathy May would be what some folks call 'white trash'. She noisily chewed gum throughout the interview, which I found increasingly irritating, especially when she blew and popped bubbles. If it had really been a traumatic experience for her—that moment had long since passed.

I got the feeling as she told her story that I was getting an embroidered version. It is, I believe, a natural process, which is the result of telling the same story too many times. The storyteller, becoming bored with their own oft repeated tale, feels like jazzing it up a bit. So, a lot of what she told me I took with a pinch of salt.

She said that she had been caught short driving back from the diner. She stopped by the side of the road (Bray Road), and went to pee amongst the trees. She crouched down amongst some bushes. It was then she saw the Beast. It was a huge wolf-like creature, she said. It was standing upright—just like a man, rubbing its back against the rough bark of a tree. It had a huge, long, greasy muzzle, overloaded with sharp teeth. She particularly remembered its glaring yellow eyes, like a dog with rabies, she said.

Cathy May had been squatting and peeing when she saw it. She watched in horror as the Beast caught a whiff of her steaming piss. Its muzzle shot straight up in the air, as if

savouring it, and she could feel her bowels emptying as it turned its head slowly towards her. The yellow eyes lasered in on her. She pulled up her wet, shit-filled panties, and ran as fast as she could to her car. She lost her high heels on the way (which the police later recovered).

She locked herself inside the car. She said the Beast had approached the car on four legs. It had glared at her with its mad yellow eyes, and she had buried her head in her hands. She heard it scratching at the car and even rocking it, as if, for all the world, it were trying to shake her out of it.

She took me outside and showed me the scratches on her car. There was no denying they really did look like claw marks. They were raked downwards, and had gotten deep into the paintwork. But they could just as easily have been made deliberately by someone's car keys. On top of that, the police had been all over it and had found no evidence it had been attacked by any kind of animal. It also turned out they hadn't found any paw prints in the area, or signs that any large predator had been in the vicinity. They had even called in a veterinarian, and some expert local hunters who confirmed the police findings. Cathy May had dismissed the lack of evidence by saying it was a supernatural being and probably just left prints when it felt like it. Its claws were real enough though, she said.

I have to say I did not buy Cathy May's story. It bore too many resemblances to previous stories of the Beast. I reckon that Cathy May had done her homework well and truly before she came out with her so-called ordeal. My guess is she had made the scratches on the car herself. She had not been stupid enough to try to falsify animal paw prints or anything of that sort—too obvious. She just put on a good act. Cathy May had earned her fifteen minutes of fame.

When I told Mrs. Gray, my landlady, she could barely conceal her distaste for Cathy May, and said it was just what you would expect from 'the likes of her'.

In fact, Mrs. Gray, who is a widow, has lived in Elkhorn all her life. She has no children or other relatives, and is already fussing over me as if we were kin. However, she could be a great source of information about the Beast, as she enjoys a 'good' chat—her words not mine. She has already told me about an old man who lives on Mount Street. She reckons this man, Herbert Naylor, who is nearly the same age as her (so he must be pretty ancient judging from the appearance of Mrs. Gray), and is the local librarian knows everything there is to know about the Beast. According to Mrs. Gray if I am really serious about my investigation I should consult him ASAP—which I intend to do first thing in the morning, if only to make my landlady happy.

Email to the Sub-Editor of The Detroit Gazette. 15th May 2014.

Dear Mr. Jones,

Today, I visited the head librarian of Elkhorn, Mr. Naylor, on the advice of my landlady. Apparently, he is the authority in the town on all things concerning the Beast of Bray Road. I found him to be a somewhat frumpy old man, particularly fussy about his bow-tied, tweed-

suited appearance and neatness in general. His desk was the most organised desk I have ever seen. Everything was in an exact position, and there was not a speck of dust in sight. He agreed to be interviewed, but for some reason he would not allow me to record it. He said, that if he were perfectly candid with me about the legend, and his own suspicions, he might be open to being sued. Some of the people he could mention, he told me, were still alive. Reading between the lines, I gather that Mr. Naylor is not exactly the most popular resident of Elkhorn. Some of what he told me, though, was very interesting. There were quite a number of things he related to me that I had never heard or read about before in relation to the Beast.

His own theory, though, was somewhat bizarre and macabre, to say the least. It was his outrageous proposition that the killings were an elaborate hoax fabricated by a network of sadistic serial killers throughout the state. He claimed that they probably used bear pelts with which to disguise themselves. They could then deliberately target the most vulnerable and gullible people in the community who would make good witnesses to a lurking beast or werewolf. That would cloud over what was really happening. By perpetuating the legend of the infamous Beast, locals were distracted enough not to notice the disappearance of tourists or people just passing through. It made a lot of sense, in a way, as there were no records of the Beast actually attacking a human being. According to witnesses who had supposedly seen the Beast it appeared to live off road kill. Most of the sightings seemed to support this. It was usually spotted near roads, apparently scavenging for food. A lot of sightings were during the day which could suggest, I suppose, that it did not mind being seen or even wanted to be seen.

Mr. Naylor's twist on the legend, albeit shocking and alarming, was gruesomely compelling as we live in an age of serial killers. I dare say I am giving more credence to Naylor's explanation than it deserves, but nevertheless....

He gave me the names and addresses of two of his main suspects. Let's call them Mr. and Mrs. X (a married couple), and a widower, Mr. Y. He urged me not to go alone to visit them, and that if I did I should go armed. I asked him rather jokingly if I should take silver bullets. This harmless wisecrack did not seem to go down at all well with Mr. Naylor. He said it was no joking matter as I would literally be walking into the wolves' lairs.

I intend to visit Mr. and Mrs. X first thing in the morning and if possible Mr. Y in the afternoon or evening. I will visit them alone and unarmed as I have never liked firearms. I bid a furrowed browed Mr. Naylor adieu. I almost expected him to hand me a crucifix when I left the library!

Mary Wells

Email to Ms Wells. 15th May 2014.

Dear Ms. Wells,

Mary, I hope you will take Mr. Naylor's advice and warning seriously. He knows much more

about that town, its folk, and the Beast than you do. I don't think he was trying to needlessly frighten you.

Take much care,
Lawrence Jones

Mary Wells' diary entry. 16th May 2014.

Today, began well. But it got bad in the afternoon and ended dismally. I'm really tired as my car broke down some miles out of town and as luck would have it no cars came past. My feet are swollen and blistered from the walk. I don't want to speak to my landlady at the moment, she would no doubt make an awful fuss, so I have snuck upstairs to my room. I don't think she even knows I'm here. I will go down later to get something to eat because I'm really hungry, but I want to get this all written down before I forget anything.

I visited Mr. and Mrs. Stevens first off. I have called them Mr. and Mrs. X in my correspondence. I will also refer to them with the same nomenclature in my finished article. They lived some fifteen minutes' drive out of town. As soon as I set eyes on them (they were both sitting in their front garden drinking lemonade), I could see why they were regarded with such suspicion by Elkhorn's more conservative residents like Mr. Naylor, the librarian.

Both of the Stevens had extremely long and wild looking hair, the hirsute Mr. Stevens had an equally untamed beard, and Mrs. Stevens had more than a hint of a moustache. They were, however, extremely friendly. They immediately sat me down with them to enjoy a lemonade in the sunshine of the garden.

To begin with, I must admit, I was slightly unnerved by their friendliness. I couldn't help wondering if it were merely a show of false amiability they used to fool potential victims. I felt instinctively, though, that they were genuinely friendly people, but because they gave the impression of odd, old hippies and kept to themselves, they aroused suspicion—unfortunately an only too familiar human reaction in some rural areas. I asked them some general questions about the Bray Road Beast.

After a while, I felt sufficiently relaxed to confide in them the true nature of my visit and interview, and the suspicions about them, although, I was careful not to mention Mr. Naylor's name. I did not want to create any unnecessary hostility between the residents of Elkhorn. The Stevens seemed to be completely aware of the way they aroused suspicion amongst the more paranoid residents. Mr. Steven just laughed and rolled a joint, soon all three of us were laughing. At that moment, in the sunlit garden, the whole Beast legend thing did seem completely ridiculous and laughable. Needless to say, I left the Stevens in high spirits. Any trace of good vibes soon dissipated upon meeting Mr. Kennedy (I shall call him Mr. Y in my article. If I choose to write about him at all, that is).

Mr. Kennedy is a widower and quite the most obnoxious individual I have ever met in my life. He too lived out of town, a little further than the Stevens, but there the similarities between him and the Stevens ended. My first warning was a shotgun blast over my head as I

approached his Stars and Stripes bedecked Teardrop trailer. I threw myself to the ground and ate dirt.

‘Who the fuck are you and what to you want?’ came this raucous voice from the direction of the Teardrop.

I managed to splutter out that I was a reporter investigating the Bray Road Beast legend. There was an audible sigh from the trailer. It was accompanied by several muttered oaths.

‘Not a fucking ‘nother one. How many times have I told you people I jus’ wanna be left alone/’

I stayed on the ground. The aggressive sounding man seemed to be considering something.

‘Did you bring me anything?’

This was what I had been told to expect, and what I had been waiting for. I had come prepared. The Stevens had summed Kennedy up as the most ill-mannered, cantankerous bastard in Elkhorn and after the welcome he gave me I was more than inclined to agree with them. They were the ones who had advised me to obtain a bottle of Kentucky bourbon, evidently, it was the only thing that would pacify Kennedy.

I timidly held up the bag containing the bourbon hoping to God it hadn’t broken. The shotgun barrel disappeared into the depths of the trailer. A few moments later the trailer door was kicked open.

‘Git yur scrawny ass in ‘ere then. I ain’t got all day. I’m a busy guy.’ He growled from somewhere in the dim interior.

If he was a busy guy, it wasn’t doing cleaning. The place stank of a mixture of garbage and unwashed clothes. What little light penetrated the dirt encrusted windows revealed a bent old man with a mane of wispy white hair, a three-day stubble, and large yellow and brown rotten teeth (with equally rotten breath to accompany them).

Kennedy, was dressed solely in a ragged tartan dressing-gown, and a filthy, food stained vest. He smelled of cabbages and cat shit. He grabbed the bottle from me, and without preamble expertly snapped the top. He took such a long slug from the bottle I didn’t think he would stop. He didn’t offer me any, but I would not have drunk anything that had touched those foul lips anyway. He grunted, and sat on his filthy single bed. He pointed me to the only chair in the trailer. It was plastic, cracked and sun baked. I wondered if it would take my weight, it looked so flimsy.

The interview did not go well from the very start. He refused to let me record it or even take notes. According to him, and I quote: ‘It was a load of fuckin’ commie hogwash to disguise a fuckin’ commie conspiracy’. In fact, during the interview, I was to discover that anything bad happening in the world was some sort of commie conspiracy. The Cold War was well and

truly still alive in Kennedy's Teardrop. And he no doubt thought all journalists were closet, or downright open communists. I decided to keep my democratic views to myself—I sensed, they would not go down too well. Evidently, Kennedy had been a Marine, and I had to listen to a long diatribe about how deplorably the present government treated its Vietnam Vets. Luckily, this was common ground for us as I shared the same views. So, I could wholeheartedly agree with him. I think he sensed that my feelings were genuine, either that, or the bourbon was taking effect because he became less gruff and actually started to open up a bit.

He told me a disturbing story of his worst experience in Vietnam that had my hairs standing on end. After a bruising encounter with 'Charlie' the few remaining men of his platoon had become cut off. They found themselves lost in thick jungle with hardly any rations left, and only a little water. After a few days hunger kicked in. After a week, they were too weak to march, and some men were getting weird looks in their eyes. They were hungry looks, starving looks, murderous looks....

It got to the stage when none of them really slept—although, they were all exhausted. They glared at each other from the little nests they had made in the undergrowth with red eyes and slaving mouths. It was lucky for all of them that one of their comrades succumbed to starvation and died. It was much better to eat an already dead man than having to draw lots for a live one. They ate him raw. It would have been suicide to make a fire in 'Charlie's' territory.

It took a while for it to sink into my brain that Kennedy was confessing to being a cannibal. Of course, when they were eventually rescued, the Marine corps turned a blind eye to it all. The dead soldier, was declared missing in action, and the whole thing was covered up. Kennedy made me swear I would not write about it. As he put it: 'He would come to fuckin' git me good, if I ever did, and make sure I never wrote again'. I have no doubts that he would, drunk or not.

I didn't get much out of him about the Beast. He said that the folks of Elkhorn had nothing better to do than invent fairy stories because they were all a bunch of homosexual commies who were scared of their own shadows. He reckoned it was just a bear (a theory shared by many others). Although, he had never seen a bear thereabouts, and he had lived in Elkhorn all his life. By this time he had finished the bottle. After ascertaining that I didn't have any more bourbon, the interview came to an impromptu end. He implied that I could return again if I brought the necessary beverage. Then he promptly passed out on his filthy mattress. I took this as a welcome signal to leave the stinking place.

Kennedy's tale of cannibalism in Vietnam is indeed a revelation, and in the wrong hands could cause quite a lot of ill-feeling towards him, not to mention suspicion, from the townsfolk. But I intend to stick by my word and not use it. I consider him little more than an extreme right-wing eccentric, and if I'm completely honest I'm quite frightened of him. I think if he was really a werewolf, or believed he was, he would not have been so openly hostile. And he would definitely not have told me that horrible war story, bourbon or no bourbon.

I was driving back to my lodgings. I had actually driven past Bray Road—when it happened. My car ran out of gas. I turned the air blue with swearing. It was getting dark and I couldn't get a signal on my mobile. There was nothing for it but to walk. I swore at my high heels. I swore at the road. I swore at the trees and the grass. I swore at the sky itself. No car came past. I couldn't help thinking, this really was what being stuck in the middle of nowhere was like. Funnily enough, now I look back, no thoughts of the Beast came into my head, which is quite surprising given the circumstances.

So, I've finally made it back (obviously). It is quite dark now, but the skies are illuminated by a bright full moon. It beams down on the tops of the silvery elms surrounding Elkhorn. I have decided not to close the curtains or put the light on. Moonlight, is the right sort of light to write about werewolves. It's kind of spooky up here in this converted loft room, but I suppose that kinda goes with the territory.

A strange thing: Mr. Naylor is coming up the path. I hope the fuck he is not coming to see me! I'm really not in the mood for more lectures at the moment. But there is something strange going on here. Mrs. Gray has come out to meet him. There is something weird happening to both of them. They are both jerking about like they are having epileptic fits. And Naylor is starting to howl. Oh no, I can't believe what I'm seeing. They're both stripping off and they're covered in thick hair! They have turned around. They're staring up at my window with bright yellow eyes as if they can see straight into my room. They are coming into the house on all fours! No No God help me please

Note: (From this point on all the writing is scribbled and words are not identifiable)

Article in the Detroit Gazette. 22nd May 2014.

As of today, one of our journalists: Ms. Wells (beloved daughter of our founder and proprietor Mr. J. Wells), has been missing for eight days. Her last known whereabouts was Elkhorn, Wisconsin. She was following up a story on the 'Bray Road Beast' sightings. The last person to talk to her was Mrs. Gray, in whose residence she had been staying. She was interviewing witnesses to the possibility of the Beast's existence. Mrs. Gray said that Ms. Wells' investigations had led her to follow a lead in Wexford County, Michigan, where a cryptozoological was allegedly first reported in 1887, and bears many resemblances to the Beast of Bray Road. Mrs. Gray said that Ms. Wells had told her that she would not be returning to Elkhorn, and she was leaving straight away as she had 'a hot tip'. As yet this periodical has received no communication from Ms. Wells and the newspaper will reward \$100,000 to anybody who supplies information leading to her whereabouts.

Article in the Detroit Gazette. 11th August 2017.

It is over three years, since one of our reporters, Ms. Wells (beloved daughter of our founder and proprietor Mr. J. Wells), went missing whilst investigating the reports of fresh sightings of the Beast of Bray Road. Three days ago, two youths and an adult, whilst on a camping trip deep in the woods surrounding Elkhorn, discovered a small barn completely hidden by the

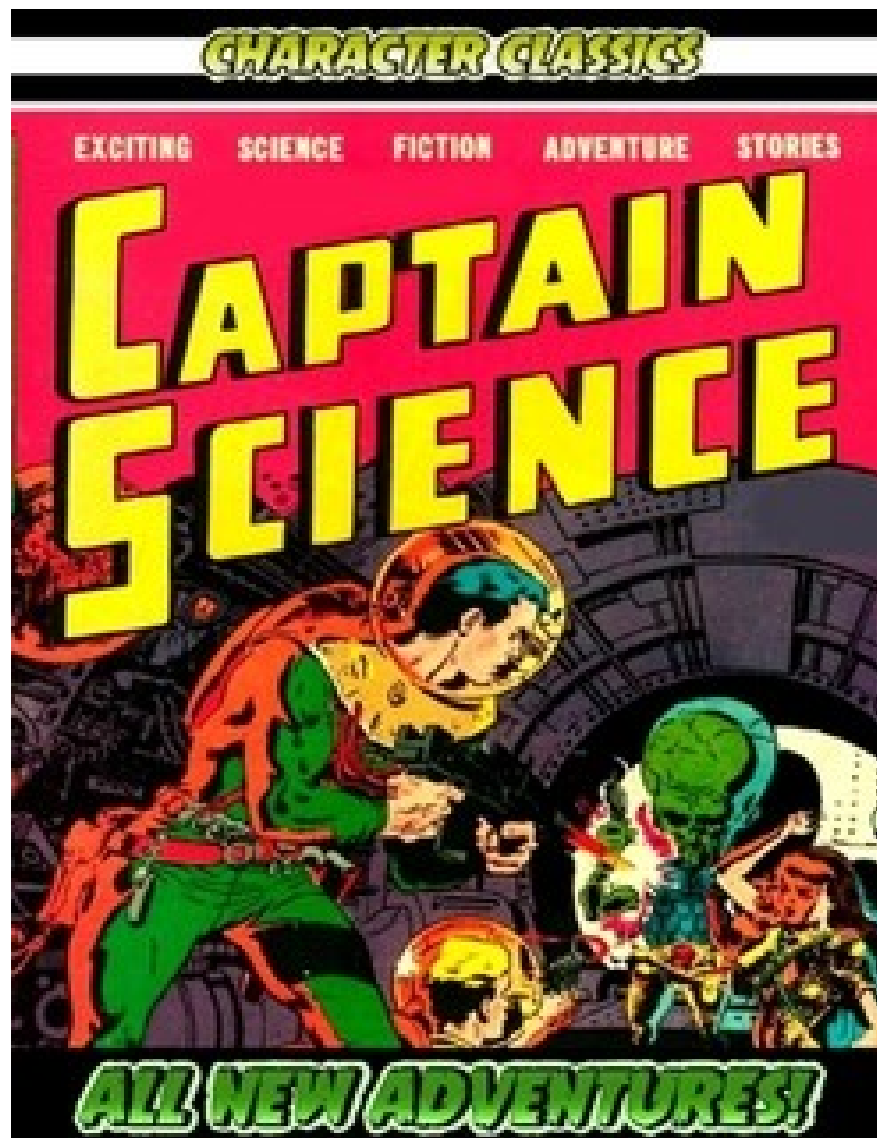
surrounding overgrown vegetation. They entered the dilapidated barn where they discovered some old clothes which appeared to be covered with blood stains. They reported what they had discovered to the Elkhorn police immediately. DNA test results proved that the blood on the garments belonged to Ms. Wells, but there was no trace of a body. The clothes were ripped in many places, which appeared to tell sadly of a frenzied attack. An important piece of evidence was also discovered at the scene of what appears to be a dastardly and terrible crime: the diary of Ms. Wells.

It appears to have been flung aside when she was attacked, and went unnoticed by her attacker or attackers. Its contents have presented a lot of clues into what appears to be Ms. Wells' demise but the main suspects which the police confirm were named in the diary have either passed away themselves, or have airtight alibis. The diary has been retained by her father who has stated that its contents will remain private until further notice.

Meanwhile, there have been fresh sightings of the Beast of Bray Road.

THE END

NOW AVAILABLE FROM [ROGUE PLANET PRESS](#):



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THE NEW CONDITION by Gary Murphy

The waiting room at the King Street Medical Centre was jam-packed with the ill and dying today, with Connor Mulligan sat somewhere at the back row, his eyes sore and stinging, his cough more nervous than chesty.

Sitting there, he saw a woman of maybe sixty, her face swollen with purple rings under her eyes, behind big National Health spectacles bought at a discount price at Vision Express three weeks ago. She was elderly and fragile, Connor observed. They could have done her a better deal than give her those shitty things to put on her wizened, craggy face. Suddenly, she coughed and spluttered, turning heads. Connor caught a small bit of her phlegm on his lower lip. "Do you mind?" he said, perplexed. "Oh sorry, son..." she said, yet hardly meant it. Connor's sympathy for her rapidly dissolved and vanished into the ether. She deserved no sympathy, rude old cow. She could have been passing on horrible diseases for all anybody knew.

He was getting tired of waiting, so he stood and walked outside to catch a cigarette. Connor was 45 years old and a hypochondriac, stopping by at this surgery most days of the week to pester the lives out of busy professionals with requests for medication for something or other. Normally, he was sent home empty-handed, his charade exposed almost every time he visited.

But this time it was serious (wasn't it always, though?). Lately, he had sensed something was very wrong, deeply wrong, going by these new symptoms.

He wandered back indoors to wait for his call. His name appeared on the monitor on the wall-mounted TV in the crowded, piss-stinking waiting room, and it said he was required in Room 3, by Dr Francis Becker. Connor knew this guy well. He was a tough cookie to break.

Strolling into Room 3, Connor grinned at the bored-looking man sat behind his huge mahogany desk, ready to type on his computer.

Becker said, "And what is the matter with you today, Connor?"

Yes, they were on first-name terms here. Nothing to be shy about...

"May I be seated, doctor? I'm not feeling well at all, you see...I've had a bit of stomach-ache, but that's only touching the surface..." Connor's face etched by anxiety and nervousness. Yes, he was truly worried today. Something was wrong and needed fixed.

"Please, sit yourself down and tell me everything."

The 45 year old looked tearful. "I'm scared, doctor. This morning when I woke up I noticed a red patch on the bed-sheet where my rectum had leaked during the night as I slept—a discharge—a bloody discharge—and to be honest, I find it quite disturbing."

Francis Becker shook his head and sighed heavily. "But you said that last week, and three weeks before. I'm sure you just like me probing your rectum with my fingers and thumbs!"

Sobbing, Connor implored, “I don’t want to die, Dr Becker. I’m too young. I’m only 45 years old and this is happening to me—disease, blood, dying so young!”

Becker reached across the desk to comfort his patient. Placing a warming hand on his shoulder, the doctor said, “Believe me, you’re not going to die...do you perhaps want me to examine your back passage today?”

“Oh, yes please, doctor...do you wish me to remove me jeans and bend over the couch, just to get ready for you?”

Becker said, “If you must, yes...” He never looked forward to this procedure, looking in-depth into middle-aged men’s grubby arseholes. Who could blame him? Some arses that came in here, male or female (and he had a few), looked downright possessed.

Connor did as he was told. “Do you want me to spread my cheeks?”

It was a stupid question. Annoyed, the doctor said, “Of course...how else can we identify the bloody problem?”

Bloody indeed...

Yes, there was something wrong in that arse today. Connor Mulligan truly had something to worry about. In fact, it was deeply disturbing.

“Holy shit,” the doctor gasped.

Protruding from the arsehole was a snake-head with three separate, obscene little demon heads. Each head had mouths with a macabre set of tiny fangs, whilst each head had two clear and distinct, minute blue, peering eyes. They resembled piranha fish, their heads slimy as well as silvery, and their teeth short and razor-sharp. When they looked across at the doctor observing them with disgust and surprise, staring back at them, one or two of the creature’s mouths widened and shrieked in what might have been horror or surprise...or was it just because they had been exposed, and in that, exposed to stark sunlight for the first time in ages?

Oblivious, Connor said, “Is anything wrong, Dr Becker? Is it piles I have? They’re a bit itchy but I’ve refrained from scratching. And they’ve itched like a sod, believe me!”

Becker said, “It’s not piles, Mr Mulligan. It’s much worse.”

“How much worse...is it really bad?”

“A lot fucking worse, I think. And yes, it is really bad.”

It seemed this hypochondriac had come up with the goods this time, a bona fide medical problem. Francis Becker, personally, and during his training, had seen nothing like it in his life, as this was straight out of a poor 80s horror movie. It reminded him of the pulp fiction he read as a kid in Sweden, and in particular the body horror stories in American and Japanese comics and magazines, stories that made him make up his mind to become a doctor in the

very beginning. Yes, the vision before him was terrifying. Yet it also intrigued and excited him. He LOVED this stuff...

And then, to complicate matters further, the huge spongy cheeks of Connor's arse began to move of their own accord. Through the soft flesh of these broad cheeks emerged another two of the slimy miniscule monster heads on the right, and another two on the left. Connor yelled and screamed. The GP was thoroughly transfixed and seemingly obsessed by this vision of blood and gore before him in the room, the sight of all this charred and ripped flesh as well as the tiny alien monsters it birthed.

Connor collapsed to the floor, dead and ravaged.

Maddened and disturbed, Francis Becker ran screaming from his GP's office into the waiting room—a very empty waiting room—and then outdoors onto the street where It was pouring down with heavy pelting rain as a great wind blew.

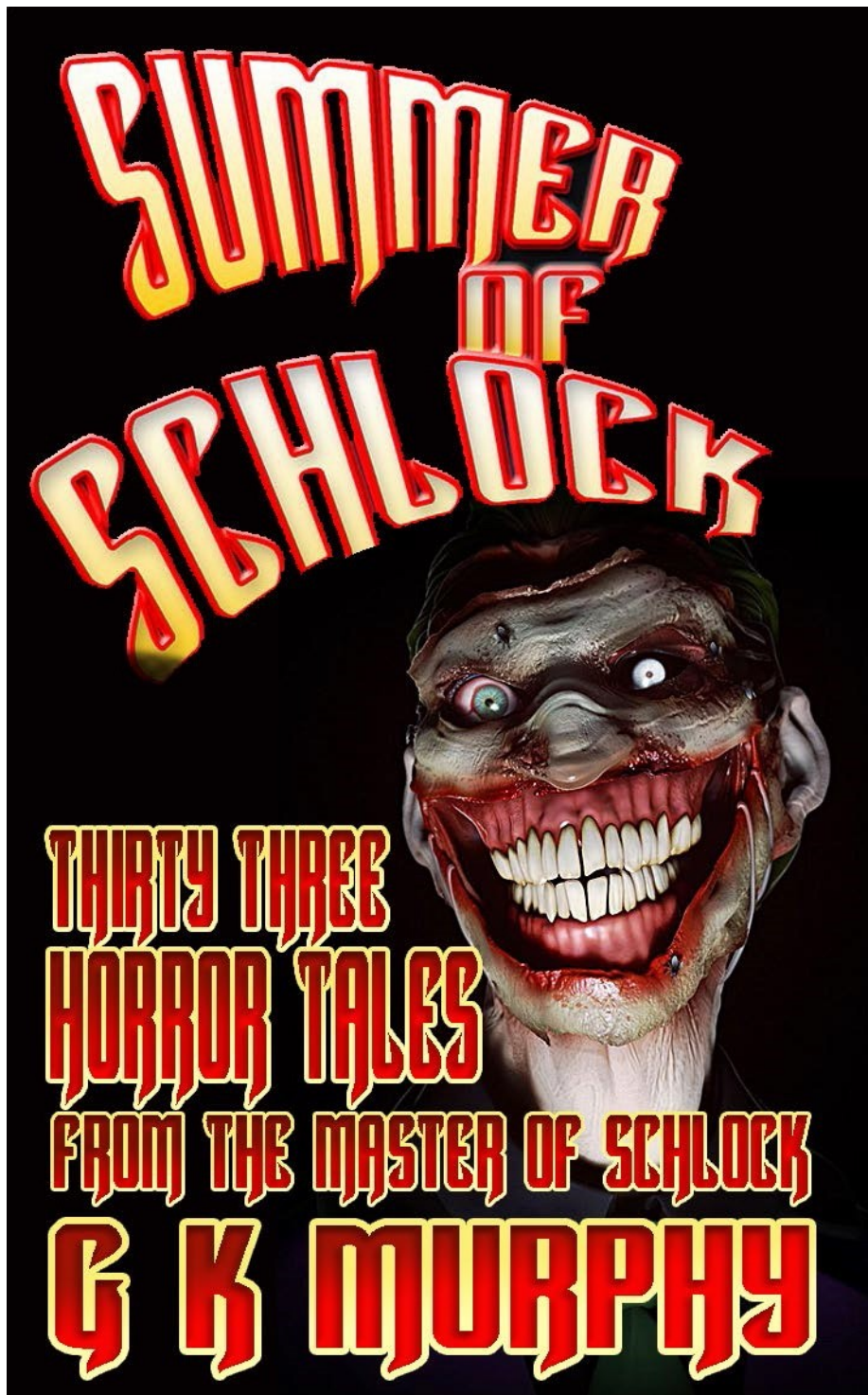
What had happened to the weather? Minutes ago, it had a sunny day.

But the vision from the skies he could not ignore or pretend did not exist.

“Oh, good God...” he muttered, when his eyes widened with horror at the huge spaceship in the heavens above, the sound and terrific rumble of its engines booming out. Suddenly, everything made sense. These mesmerizing creatures had arrived in full and commenced the task of claiming the planet and taking over. Connor Mulligan was but one of those humans possessed by these devils. Becker looked up the street. They were there, coming for him, make no mistake...they were coming for him.

THE END

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HOLDING THE LINE by Paul Lubaczewski

Part Two

“No, that’s alright, it’s fine, you done come to where you need to be, young Hypes,” the old man smiled happily. “That’s for true. Saved me the bother of having to track you down and bring you here. Thought I’d have to drag off some young’un from one of the old families afore you came home, and here you are just a settin’ in my house, now don’t that just beat all?”

“What in the hell are you talking about?” Andy demanded, attempting to sidle around the old man to give himself a clear pass at the door.

“You don’t know it yet, young Hypes, but y’all got a duty to do in this house! And I aims to see that ya do it!”

With that, the Line Man poked a bony glove encased finger straight into the centre of Andy’s chest. Andy couldn’t say why, but it staggered him for a second, the Line Man didn’t look possibly strong enough to rock Andy that easily. Then, it terrified him! He thrust the old man aside and bolted out the open front door!

He ran through the high weeds as fast as he could, stumbling once, but never looking back! Not that it mattered, as he heard the old man call over his shoulder making no move to pursue, “Run as fast as you can, young Hypes! But you’ll be back askin’ a long ton worth of questions! You mark my words, young Hypes!! You’ll be comin’ back fer yer birthright and no mistake!”

Andy practically collapsed once he got back to his own house. The old man hadn’t hurt him and hadn’t called the police on him, so Andy should look at it as “got away clean.” But somehow it didn’t feel that way at all. Somehow even back here at his own house, he still felt as trapped as he did when the old man had walked in on him snooping. Time to calm down a bit, jeez, he got caught by the town crazy person poking around the house. It wasn’t even like he knew it had been his before, he could just say that he’d thought it was abandoned when he found it. Who was going to believe the Line Man anyway? Andy was in management at one of the largest employers in the area for god’s sake, the old guy wandered around town on 90-degree days in a hooded jacket!

No, to hell with that, time to calm down, grab a beer out of the fridge, and consider dinner. He went out to his kitchen and pulled some Chinese out of the fridge that he was sure had a few days left before it went funny. A beer, and a nuked bowl of mai fun in his hands and he headed back out to the living room. Setting them down on a table he kicked on the TV sitting down, to hopefully go from completely spazzed to calmed down and maybe a bit fuzzed.

A bowl of noodles and pork, and two beers later, he finally began to feel human again. The show didn’t matter much, something involving cars and people building them on what used to be a channel that showed documentaries about nature. All that mattered at this point was feeling normal again. Everything about today was bizarre and creepy and left him off kilter. It

was stupid, but it wasn't the kind of thing that occurred to everyone, every day, so he could feasibly excuse himself for being thrown by it.

Later, he figured he might get a shower. He went to bedroom and tossed his shirt and pants into the hamper quickly following it with his socks and underwear. The bathroom was old directly off the bedroom, he'd surmised that the house was old enough, that it had just been added on when the plumbing had been installed. Most of the houses in the area that weren't the former coal owners' mansions seemed to have been built in portions. Additions to standing structures appeared as various improvements became available to the average Appalachian. The American Dream on the D.I.Y instalment plan.

The hot steam wafted up out of the old claw foot tub, filling the room with steam. One of the first things he had done after closing on the house was installing a new hot water heater. Winter nights could get cold up in these hills, a hot, HOT shower was worth its weight in gold after shovelling the drive. Andy wiped the mirror clean with a towel and looked at himself in the mirror to see if he could avoid shaving for another day. That, was when he saw it.

A black dot, on his chest, right where the old man had poked him with his finger.! It sat, not a bruise, the right contour of his chest, but, not his chest. The hair there was gone, and as he gaped at it, he could see, it was perfectly smooth there now! Like a material in his chest not made of him at all! But as he touched it, it still felt like something was still there, like something had been grafted into the spot

It had to be a stain of some kind, the old man must have had some chemicals on his hands or something! Lord knows he never took those damned gloves off! They could have anything on there, anything at all. It didn't hurt, at least there was that, it didn't feel anything! Even when he poked at it, he didn't really feel it.

Carefully, he climbed into the shower. He was sure whatever it was, whatever had happened, he'd just scrub it off with some soap and water, for all he knew he had something on his hands. He didn't remember if he'd looked at his shirt to notice some kind of stain. He'd have to make a point to look at it tomorrow to make sure it didn't get in with the rest of the laundry just in case.

Soaping up the shower scrub he went right for the spot. But, no matter how hard he scrubbed, he couldn't get any of it to budge! Not even a flash of the pink flesh underneath! There must BE pink flesh underneath, right? He scrubbed harder, and then harder still, in a panic now! Eventually, he was forced to stop, the skin around this hole in his skin had gotten raw enough, a few spots began to bleed!

What in the HELL had that old coot done to him?

He got out of the shower and dried himself off trying to think. He reached a single conclusion, the old son of a bitch knew what he'd done! That's why he was crowing about him having to come back! Of course, he would, just to find out what the old lunatic had put on him! And Andy knew where he was all right, he knew where he was at, right now! He was up in that damned house of his, probably laughing about it! Taking some sick glee in whatever party prank he'd managed to do to him.

Screw this! He went to the hamper and pulled his clothes back out and thrust them on. The old bastard could fix this or suffer the beating of his weird little life. He even thought for a moment about bringing his gun but decided not to. Even as weird and crazy as the old man clearly was, a homicide was a homicide, and he didn't want his own life to go south that way. If he didn't fix it, instead Andy could haul him off to the local cops, and the Line Man could tell THEM what he'd done! Andy noted there was no stain on his shirt, the weirdo must have treated his finger with some chemical or another, not some ink, but something that would only react to skin.

Andy would find out, as soon as he got up there.

Andy had started driving down the driveway itself before he forced himself to stop and walk the rest of the way. There was no point in tearing out the bottom of the car just because he was in a hurry. Andy had a little flashlight he'd gotten from a box store at some point in the car, so he grabbed that. No point in tripping in the rutted former drive either, a broken ankle would seriously ruin the intimidation he wanted to achieve.

As he got closer to the house, stomping through the dark wildflowers, Andy could see through the misty mountain night two lights were lit on the house's porch. It seemed like the old nut was expecting him back sure enough, and wanted to make sure Andy knew that he'd be taking guests tonight. For some reason, this made Andy even madder, like the old weirdo was playing with him. Like he thought Andy was local kid who would fall for his mumbo jumbo about duty, or be impressed that he knew his Mom's last name!

"Come on out of there, you crazy freak!" Andy yelled as he yanked the door open.

He heard the man's cracked voice calling from up above, "Ain't no need to be yellin' so! I knew you wuz comin'. I'm up here in the attic, a waitin' for y'all to get here!"

"What do you want?! Look, I'm sorry about coming into your house!" Andy yelled up the steps.

It was quiet for a second before the Line Man called back down, "I tole you before, I ain't even mad, y'all come on up and I'll explain it. Lamp's right there by the door bring it with, to light your way!"

Andy was thrown for a moment, he'd come up screaming like a mad man himself, and the old man didn't sound the least bit perturbed by it. For all the elderly thing could know, Andy could be here to cause him violence, and yet, the Line Man sounded happy to see him! Andy stood there for a second, just staring at the lamp on the stand by the door unsure of himself now.

While the house creaked in the night as it settled, he made his decision. He'd come here to find out what the old fool had done to his chest, and Andy wasn't going to be given that information standing down here in the front hall now was he? He seized the oil lamp from where it stood on the nightstand and began his way up the ancient wooden steps.

He reached the steps to the attic, he could see it outlined by what he could only suppose was lamp light as well, but closed. Andy hesitated once again, unsure of himself, until the cackling voice called down, "Well come on up, you didn't come all this way to have yourself a gander at the attic door now did you?"

He reached the top of the stairs, and flung the door open, hoping to ruin any plans the Line Man had of maybe ambushing him as he entered. He needn't have worried, he didn't even see him! Directly in front of him, under the ancient bows of this elderly house, there were candles laid out for light. They guttered from the force of the wind caused by the doors opening, but none were extinguished from it.

But that was not the strange part, well certainly not the strangest, that honour went to how the shadows danced in every other part of the large and airy attic, but absolutely none moved at all on the wall behind the candles! Where there should be light and flickering shadows on the wall, there was nothing, absolute nothing! Andy could see that the candles were laid out in front of it, in what was clearly marked off as a pattern that he didn't recognize, the shadows flickered and wandered about the attic everywhere but on the wall behind the candles.

Then, the Line Man spoke out of the darkness, "Strange ain't it?"

Andy whirled to where he had thought the voice was coming from, but to his astonishment, he could see no-one. No-one that is, until the Line Man raised his head to stare at him, and even then, only the wrinkled dirty old face, and nothing else.

The Line Man stepped forward, and Andy gaped when it was revealed that the reason he had not seen him, was the Line Man's entire body was every bit as black as the gaping mark on Andy's own chest! Every bit as black as the hole on the wall! The naked old man did not show where something was, but only showed where nothing existed at all! Absolute darkness, which the light of the candles did not reflect off of! The only way Andy could even tell where the man's body was, was that he could see the shadows dancing behind the old man as he stretched out his arms stepping towards him.

"So, a welcome home to the ol' Lord of the Manse, I be supposin'?"

Andy recovered from his astonishment enough to blurt, "I don't know what in the HELL you are talking about, you monster!"

The old man stopped, and smiled at that, before saying, "Well, monster I may be, but it's a monster you're becomin'."

Now it was Andy's turn to step towards the man suddenly no longer afraid or in awe, but suddenly furious again, "What did you DO to me?"

"I ain't done nuthin' to you but bring out your birthright, boy!" the old man smiled happily. "Don't y'all know, that you're the rightful heir and master to Flattop House?"

"I've never been told anything like that, I just know my family hails from here at one point. I don't own this house you old fool!" Some part of Andy was relieved now, thinking to himself that this was all now a case of mistaken identity. He could talk it out, and have whatever the old man had done, undone just as easily!

“Oh, but I’m afraid you do, young sir!” The old man peered intently at Andy and then continued, “Your, I’m guessing, Great-Great Grandfather built this house around about, oh, 1893, young Hypes. I’ve been just holding it down and keepin’ the Line. That’s why the locals call me what they do, since then.”

“When did you start doing this job for my family?” Andy demanded incredulously.

“Say, around 1898.”

“You really are nuts you know that? You may be old but you’re not—”

“140 years old?” the Line Man said, cutting him off. “I’ll give ya that, I might be 143 by now, but my beauty regimen hides it well. But I’ve just about had it, doin’ the work, too old, too worn out. Not enough of the real me left to do it anymore, all of it sucked away into the black as I fought with it! Now I can give it back to you. It was your family’s job in the first damned place, but your damned Great-Great Grand-pappy ran out on me and left me holding the bag on this damned place!”

“Alright, that does it! Just fix what the hell you did to my chest and let me get the hell OUT of this nut house!” Andy snarled.

“Can’t be doin’ that,” the Line Man said quietly.

“Of course you can, you did it to yourself! Now you’ve done it to me! Now UN do it God damn it!”

“Don’t be takin’ the lord’s name in vain, boy, this ain’t his fault!”

Oddly Andy felt chagrined by the rebuke, it felt like a splash of cold water on his face. “I didn’t realize you were religious, I apologize.” He had lived in the area long enough to understand the strong religious nature of many residents and to know, this was something you apologized for automatically if called out on it. Andy had just responded instinctively.

“If Ezekiel had paid things like that more mind, neither one of us would be in the mess we’re in,” Line Man said, slightly mollified.

“What mess are you talking about?” Andy demanded, again feeling his frustrations bubble back up.

“Your ancestor boy! He messed with things ought to be left be. He made a bunch of money in coal, built this house, and suddenly since he was all big and rich now, he thought he needed to be a man of learnin’! Took himself up north and bought all kinds of books from libraries and stores up there. Just bought ‘em willy-nilly and stacked em up on shelves. Some of those books shoulda stayed on up North I reckon. Once he got em, he got fascinated with some of em, the worst of em. It might be weird for a man to be readin’ old romances, but it would have been better by far than what he decided himself to get to readin’. Then he started doin’ more but readin’,” the old man subsided for a moment.

“Like, what?” Andy asked quietly, his curiosity now returning to him.

“He started comin’ up here and doing things out of the books! He said if it worked out, we’d all be rich forever! Said, we’d be like gods! Said the things would help him! More the fool me I didn’t light out of here to get a preacher there and then! One day he comes down white as a sheet, didn’t eat no breakfast, just grabbed me to get me away from the other servants, and tole me, ‘Shamus, I haves to go, but afore I do, I need you to promise to do things for me, otherwise there will be terrible consequences for everyone, anywhere near here!’ Now, I used to be a soldier afore I become his handyman, I know, sometimes you have to do things you’d rather not for the good of everyone, so I agreed.”

“I’m sorry for you, but I still don’t know what this has to do with me at all! I just work at a call centre for the love of all that’s holy! I had nothing to do with what some, now turned to dust, ancestor of mine did,” Andy declared his voice subdued, but with some of the anger coming back.

“Now that’s where you’re wrong boy, would that you weren’t, cause, believe me, I ain’t got nuthin gainst you personally,” the old man said quietly. “Your ultimate sire, he opened something. See that black spot? It’s a hole, leading to a place where things dwell, and I do mean things. Whatever shape they have, they steal from our world, and if left to themselves, they’d steal the whole place, just to feel the one thing we got they ain’t, the warm glow of life and substance. They look for holes in the world, that can lead them between their existence and ours. Holes like Ezekiel Hypes opened up that night. I stayed here the entire time since, performing the rites, making the chants, keeping them at bay. Now I’m spent and one of the families that were here when it happened, the old families of these mountains are going to have to hold the line until somebody figures out how to close this hole up. It has to be one of us, those that were here when it happened.”

The old man stepped forward a bit himself so he was almost face to face with Andy now, his face the only part dancing in the flickering candlelight, the only part of him that reflected anything at all, and continued, “It takes some of you back into that hole, to hold the line. Ain’t but nuthin’ left o me but my heid, now is there? I ain’t got much time left young Hypes. I was gonna have to grab some poor innocent who ain’t done a thing to anybody, didn’t even do the crime of helping Ezekiel to open this pit into the abyss, and who should walk in? Why a Hypes his own self! When I thumped you boy, I passed the mantle! It’s now your job! I’ll show you afore I go, but that hole is all yours now, bout damned time a Hypes took care of what he done!”

That snapped Andy out of whatever reverie this whole weird scene had created in him, he backed away, “Oh no, no way in HELL! I’m leaving here, you old weirdo, and I’d like to see you stop me!”

With that, Andy turned and fled down the steps, his feet pounding on the ancient wood as he went, yelling back over his shoulder, “I am leaving here you got that! Don’t follow me, and if you ever try to talk to me again I swear to god I’ll run you down with the car, nobody is going to miss you!”

He was bounding down the stairs, desperate to get out of this house, out of this weird! Get back to his car, get back to his house! He could have a Doctor look at the thing on his chest, hopefully, it wasn’t cancerous! It was just some chemical the old freak got into, that was it! Everything he thought to himself while he fled, he didn’t believe, though he just wanted it to

be true! He could feel the malevolence of the hole, the black inky dark in the attic itself, lurking away behind him! It's longing and want! But it wasn't his problem, he just wanted to see where his family came from by coming to these mountains, and there was no sin in that! He'd seen it now, and he'd seen plenty!

Andy lunged through the front door and down off the porch. He stumbled a bit, recovered, and got ready to run for his car and freedom. That was when the lights pinned him to the spot! Suddenly the entire wood and field in front of the house were illuminated by flashlights brightly blinding him!

"Who's there? Get out of my way I have to leave!" Andy yelled hoarsely his breath coming in gasps. He could hear behind him the cackling laugh of the Line Man up in the attic, driving on Andy's own panic with his laughter.

One of the lights extinguished itself and a figure came forward to where he could see it. It was Billy! "I'm sorry Andy, I can't let you do that," he said calmly.

Andy looked at Billy uncomprehending and then blurted out, "Billy, you gotta help me, man, that old guy is crazy! You gotta get me out of here!"

"No, Andy. I am sorry but you have to go back there and do your job, buddy. My family has been in these hills a long time, and I got kids, you don't. I gotta care for my kin Andy, I can't let you leave."

Andy looked down, and saw, that his co-worker had a gun in his hand! Oh to hell with these crazy people! He was out of here! He drew himself up to bull past what he had thought was his friend. That was when he heard the series of coffin nail clicks, of dozens of guns being cocked at once.

"If it's any consolation Andy, I really am awful sorry," Billy said quietly.

From behind him, he heard the gleeful voice of the Line Man, "Well if you're done, why don't you get yourself back on up here, and I can get started showing you what you need to do! Come and claim your patrimony boy!"

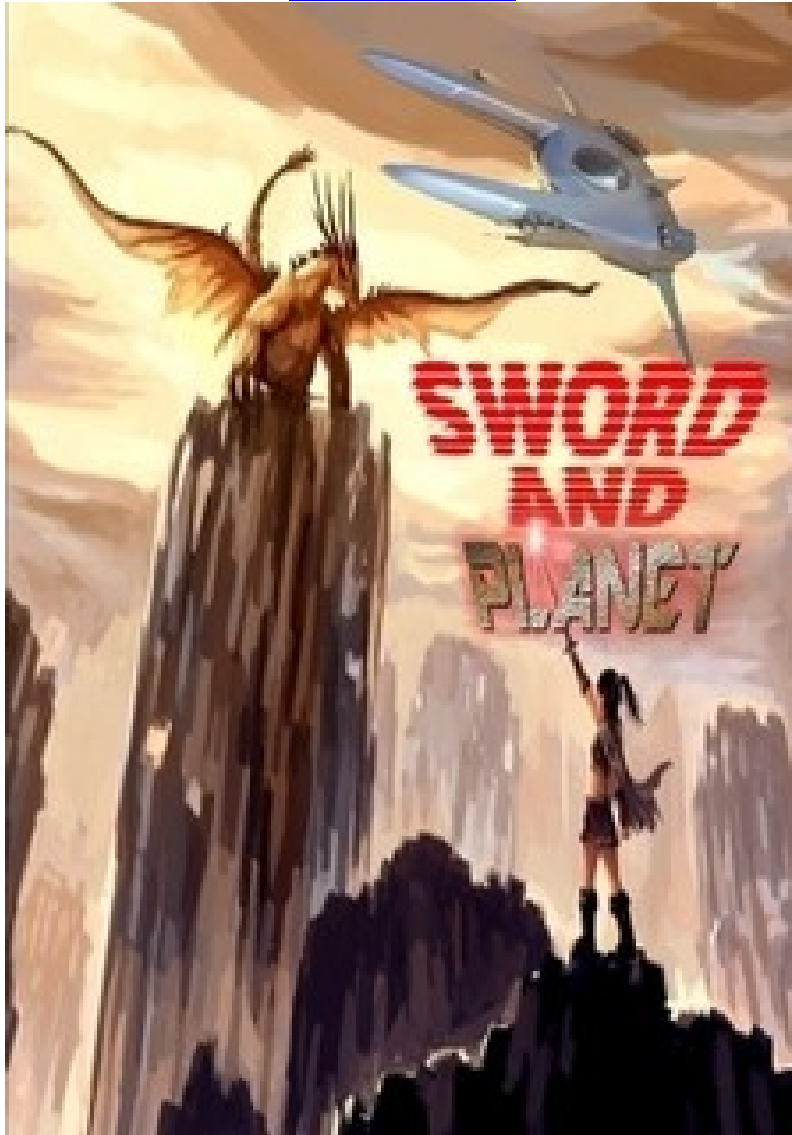
In the town of Bashford, once a day, a man trudges along next to the rural highway that runs through town. He's carrying groceries from the local supermarket. He talks to no-one, he looks at no-one, and all of the locals do the same to him.

Nobody knew the sacrifice. Nobody knew what he did to keep them safe. It had to remain that way forever. One must suffer, so that others can go through life, never knowing how close the abyss is.

THE END

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THEY COME IN THE SNOW by Ellis Hastings

Act I- Vanishing Acts

February 14th, 1855, Utah Territory

“You dirty cheatin’ whore!” shouted Corey Baggett. Leaping from his seat, the Cowboy brought one bruised and balled-up fist down onto the table. The tower of black-speckled red poker chips seemed to levitate—suspended in time—before capsizing over the knotted oak. With a guilty grin on his face; gambler, drunk, and lodge owner, Joe Edmonds, leaned forward and picked up the neglected tokens that had been cast to the ground.

“It’s not cheating, Corey,” the Gambler said, amused with the man’s frustration. “Now if I were to lose that would be another story. Pay up.”

He extended one grimy, unwashed hand and arched his fingers in a beckoning motion. With a roll of his eyes followed by a sigh, the Cowboy tore the gold-buckled belt from his waistband and dropped it into Joe’s begging hands.

“Whatever,” he glanced at the window and noticed the hail pouring down. “I’ll let it pass just this one time ‘cause you’re lettin’ these fine folks and myself wait out the storm here.”

Joe smiled a crooked smile; one tooth on top and a few on the bottom were missing, “atta boy.”

The Gambler took a swig from a half-empty bottle of whiskey brought to him by the unnamed Sheriff. It was offered to Joe as a thank you for letting the strangers seek refuge during the snow flurry outside.

He’s a good one Joe thought, he actually paid me, unlike that Chicken Farmer and Cowboy. Well, at least that Cowboy humoured my gambling a bit. What’s that damn Chicken Farmer done to help or repay me for my kind services?

Across the lodge from the Gambler and Cowboy, were the Sheriff and an elderly fellow named Whitey Douglass, or simply referred to by Joe as “Chicken Farmer”. The Sheriff sat quietly, occasionally glancing outside, patiently waiting for the snowstorm to subside so that he could head back to his home five miles East. Just ahead of the chair, blocking the view, was Whitey who peered anxiously at the swaying trees outside. The wind was a strong one. It didn’t take much focus for one to be able to hear the angry hiss of mother nature beyond the lodge’s walls. Suddenly, something in the shadows caught the old man’s eye.

“Hey, Joe?” Whitey said, refusing to take his eyes from the small clearing in the trees.

“Chicken Farmer?” Joe replied, taking another swig from his bottle. His arms tingled all over and grew warm. Although never a lightweight, the Gambler was beginning to feel the effects of the liquor.

“We’ve got somethin’ out there.”

“What do you mean something?” The Sheriff said. Pulling himself from his seat, the man of law crossed the room and fixed his eyes on the thing holding the old man’s interest.

“Looks like we got a loose tree.”

The Sheriff wiped grime from the corner of his mouth and spit on the floor, then turned back to face Corey and Joe who were currently lost in a game of poker. The preoccupied men paid no attention to the Sheriff until the man crossed the room and snatched the deck from the Gambler’s hands.

“What in God’s name are you doing?” Joe protested, reaching for the stack of cards only to have it pulled away another inch by the Sheriff. To Corey, the two men resembled brothers fighting over a toy. He sat back, finding humour in the situation.

“You hear what I said?” The Sheriff asked sternly.

“Yeah, we got a tree out there. Who gives a rat’s ass? There’s tons of damn trees on this side of the country,” Joe stumbled out of his seat and reached for the deck but was strong-armed back into the chair.

“Not just a tree. A loose tree.”

Joe rolled his eyes and took another hit of whiskey. The bottle was now all but empty.

“If we’re stayin’ the night, we don’t want to risk the wind blowing it onto the lodge.”

“He’s got a point,” Corey said, finally weighing in. He gestured to the wall at the object hanging from the mantel. “We’ve got a hatchet. One of us can go out there and chop it down.”

Joe laughed bitterly, “If by one of us you mean one of you three, then, by all means, indulge yourselves.”

The Sheriff glanced to the Cowboy and shrugged, then looked at the elderly man hovering by the window, “Chicken Farmer, you wanna go out?”

Without taking his worried eyes from the swaying tree, Whitey said, “Hell no. I’m nothing but skin and bone. I’ll freeze to death out there by the time I get that tree even half way chopped down.”

The Sheriff expected that. “Fair enough. You or I, Corey.”

Before the Cowboy could respond, Joe cut in, “Hold up, Sheriff, let me ask you a question before we decide which one of you two braves the snow. You a gambling man?”

“I can’t say that I am.”

“Alright, well I’ll play on your account, then. Don’t worry, I’m a real good gambler.”

“You’re a dirty cheater, that’s what you are!” Corey said.

“Alright, since you’re so worried about my cheating, of which I most certainly do not do, let’s play something more up your alley. How’s blackjack sound?”

Joe plucked the deck from the Sheriff’s hand and shuffled it.

“Sounds good if I can be the dealer,” Corey said distrustfully.

“Nice try,” Joe chuckled, “I’m dealer.”

“Come on, you and I both know the dealer always wins!”

“Exactly,” Joe said with a wink. Corey groaned and rolled his eyes, but before he could deny the offer, Joe had already laid the first card down. It was the three of spades.

Sighing, Corey Baggett obliged and said, “Hit me.”

Joe slapped the second card down next to the first. Four of hearts.

“Hit me.”

The table shook with the force of the Gambler’s next slap. Queen of spades. Now the count was up to nineteen.

“Feeling lucky?” Joe asked; a devious grin painted across his lips.

Even with his gut telling him the odds were fixed, Corey shook his head.

“Alrighty then. Let’s see what we have next.”

The fourth card was a two, putting the number at exactly twenty-one. “You lose.”

“Son of a whore!” Corey shouted. Frustrated, the Cowboy jumped from his seat, tipping the chair over. He crossed the room and snatched his leather jacket and hat from one of the rungs lining the wall. When he was dressed warmly, the Cowboy removed the hatchet from the mantel above the fireplace and headed for the door. Glancing over his shoulder, he said, “I know you’re a cheater, but we’ll discuss that after the damn tree’s gone.”

Then, Corey Baggett opened the door and stepped outside.

2.

A flurry of snow had picked up as soon as the Cowboy stepped into the winter wonderland. It was so bad, in fact, that it was impossible to see more than a foot ahead of him. Inside it wasn’t much better, either. Standing by the window was the Chicken Farmer who watched anxiously for the Cowboy but was unable to see anything through the blur. Without getting out of his chair, Joe glanced to the window and laughed.

“Well, ain’t you glad I didn’t lose the bet?”

He was talking to the Sheriff but got no response. The Gambler shrugged then finished off his whiskey. The floor had begun gently rotating beneath his feet. After a few minutes of being in the blind spot, the flurry ceased.

“What the Hell?” Whitey said under his breath.

“What?” The Sheriff asked, crossing to the window. He froze perplexed in his tracks.

“What do you two rattails see?” Joe called drunkenly, stumbling out his chair to get a better look.

Without looking over his shoulder, the Sheriff replied with, “He’s gone.”

“The Hell you mean he’s gone?” The Gambler forced his way between the two men and pressed his face against the smudged glass and squinted. The tree was gone, signalling that it had been chopped down by the Cowboy. But, sure enough, Corey was nowhere to be seen.

“Well, shit,” Joe scratched his head in confusion then made his way back to his chair in a zig-zagged pattern.

“Must’ve had to piss,” the Sheriff said.

He sat down on the leather chair by the door and pulled off his hole-ridden, crusty socks and dropped them to the ground. Whitey stayed by the window, nervously looking out for Corey.

3.

Five minutes had passed since the Cowboy’s disappearance. The Chicken Farmer had begun pacing the room nervously. This began to strongly agitate the Gambler, who shouted at him to sit down.

“I don’t think he went out to piss,” Whitey said nervously, now with his back turned to the window for the first time in nearly ten minutes.

“Maybe he had to drop trou,” Joe said. “Quit your worrying and sit your ass down.”

Sighing, Whitey did as the Gambler ordered and sat on the stool across from the Sheriff who was absent-mindedly picking at the filth accumulated under his fingernails.

4.

The snow bore down heavily upon the old roof. Shackles dangled loosely from the gutter, tapping the glass with enough force to cause several cracks to spread out in a spider web formation.

The Chicken Farmer peered outside of the smudged glass and shouted, “I think he’s back, but I can’t tell.”

In no mood for games, the Sheriff bounded forward and shoved the Chicken Farmer out of the way. Squinting his eyes to get a better look at the sight, he gazed outside then made a sound of confusion.

“There’s something out there. But it sure doesn’t look like him.”

Draining the last drops from the bottle, the Gambler said, “What the Hell do you mean it don’t look like him? Who else would it be?”

“I mean that thing right out there ain’t Corey. It’s something alright, but it ain’t our man.”

“Son of a whore,” The Gambler jumped from his seat angrily, then slid the table out of his way and staggered drunkenly towards the door and snatched his coat from the hook.

“Gimme your gun, Sheriff.”

The Sheriff was taken aback by the drunk man’s request and simply retracted from him, placing his hand protectively over the holster. “What do you need my gun for?”

The Gambler rolled his eyes then gestured towards the dark figure concealed by the snow and hail with his head. “Gimme the gun. I’m goin’ out there and I ain’t comin’ back in ‘til I solve this damn mystery of ours. Unless, of course, you want to go out instead.”

The Sheriff took another look at the tall, hooded figure standing by the edge of the woods watching the lodge and shuddered. The figure looked human, no doubt, but for some reason, the sight of it made him uneasy. The arms of the thing outside were long and abnormally skinny; like twigs hanging off a sapling. Its head was cocked to the right at what looked to be nearly a ninety-degree angle.

“Well?” Joe asked, regaining the Sheriff’s attention, “If I knew you better I may say you seem a bit nervous, Sheriff.”

“It’s not that. I just hate the cold,” The Sheriff lied.

The Chicken Farmer watched the figure which seemed to sway back and forth as if it had a bad case of vertigo and felt chills run down his spine. The Sheriff didn’t care to look at the unsettling sight again. Joe glanced out of the window and laughed.

“That’s the Cowboy, alright,” He said with confidence. “Thinks he’s real funny, I bet. Son of a bitch probably knows we’re watchin’ him right now, too. Well, I fancy myself as a pretty funny man, as well.”

Joe reached out and carefully grabbed the Sheriff’s revolver by the butt. The Sheriff’s hand loosened and fell away from the gun. The Gambler chuckled beneath his breath as he withdrew the revolver.

Not scared, my ass he thought. Then, he tipped his hat at the men inside and headed for the door before being stopped by the Chicken Farmer.

“Hold up,” Whitey said.

Joe paused and looked at the nervous man with a grin on his face.

“I don’t got a good feeling about this.”

The Gambler laughed—liquid courage coursing through his veins—then lifted up the revolver and shook it lightly, “Neither do I. That’s why I got a gun.”

Joe swung the door open and braved the snow. The figure remained frozen in place, except for its head which turned in his direction. Its swaying became more pronounced. The sight reminded the Chicken Farmer of a drunkard attempting to walk a straight line.

“Lord, let that be the Cowboy.”

5.

Just like when the Cowboy headed out, a snow flurry began; blocking both the figure and Joe from view. Seconds later, a shrieking yell that sounded like a mix between a bat and a cat with a broken paw came from the white abyss. It was followed immediately after by a fearful and confused shout that undeniably belonged to the Gambler. Four booming gunshots rattled across the sky, then everything went silent; apart from the heavy breathing of the Chicken Farmer and Sheriff, and the whistling of the harsh wind.

Whitey looked helplessly to the Sheriff who was already at the door, fixing to swing it open.

“What in God’s name are you doing!?”

“I gotta check on him, and make sure he’s just playing a cruel joke,” The Sheriff said.

“If he’s just playin’ a joke you don’t need to humour him!” The Chicken Farmer felt a cold sweat break across his brow as he watched anxiously as the Sheriff debated whether or not to follow in Joe’s foolish footsteps.

“Plus, you don’t even got a gun if he ain’t.”

“I’ve got a knife, though,” the Sheriff quickly withdrew a jagged blade used to skin deer from his waistband as proof.

“Yeah, but that ain’t no gun.”

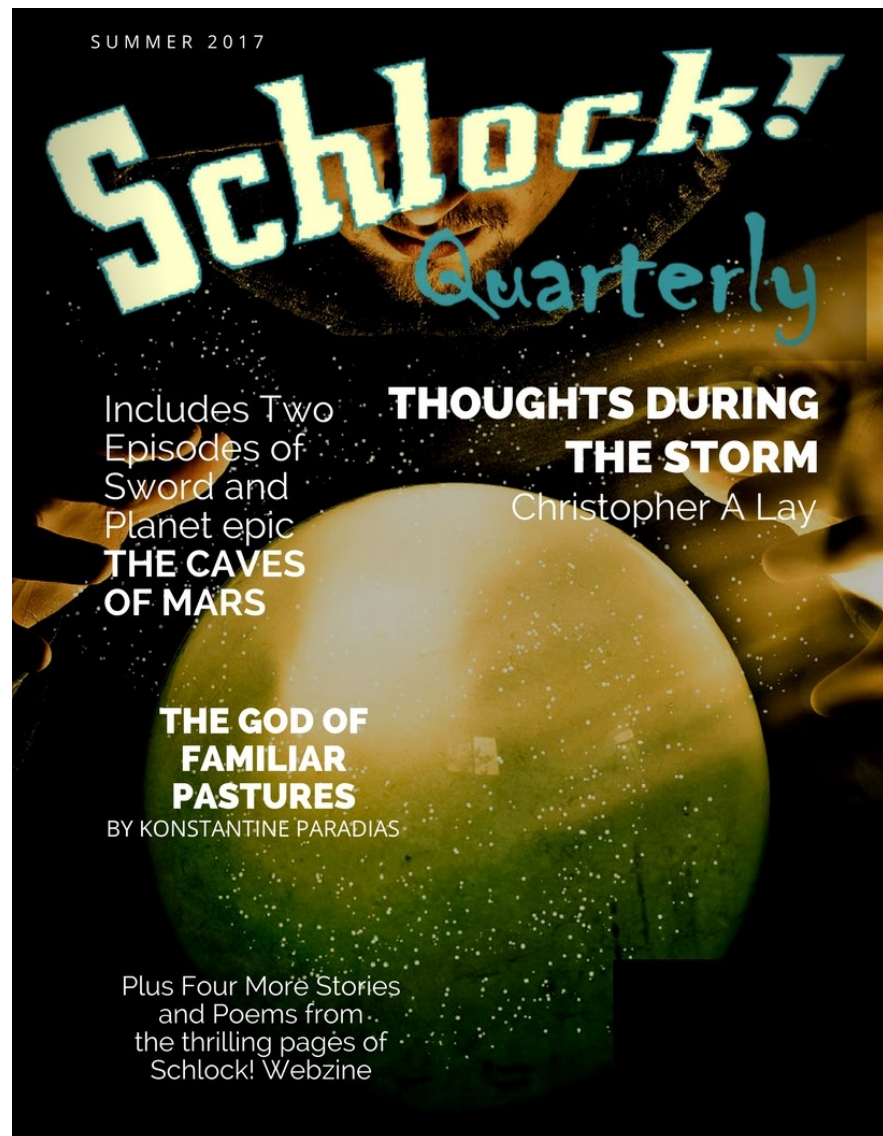
The Sheriff looked back and forth from the door to Whitey.

“Sheriff, what makes you think you can take on whatever the Hell that thing was with a knife when Joe had your revolver?”

Sighing, the Sheriff removed his hand from the frozen handle; instead flipping the latch to the right of the door to lock it. He walked back to the window and looked outside into the storm. After a moment, the flurry subsided once again. Both Joe and the figure were gone.

“Shit,” the Sheriff said with a frustrated sigh. He crossed the room angrily and threw the knife to the ground. It impaled a floorboard with a clunk.

TO BE CONTINUED



To Be Continued...

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THE HETTFORD WITCH HUNT by Oafish J Rhodes

Episode Four: Young Bones Groan

01.

The rattling rasp of continual driving rain blasted against the windows of Ron's All-Night Garage. Patterns formed in the streaking glass as it shifted over the dirty window pane. Rivulets of overlapping streams colluding to form an artistic collage of depressingly shitty weather.

The lights on the forecourt illuminated the onslaught allowing puddles to form rainbows on the oil steeped tarmac.

Gary looked at his watch. It was 10.30 and he had been on shift for two and a half hours. A dark mysterious shape appeared on the far side of the forecourt, a shifting black mass of abstraction visible only through its inertia against the rain and it's almost human shape.

Gary stared at the void and the void stared back at him. Then, because there was no other solid course of action, he went to put the kettle on and turned on the radio.

The radio was playing an uplifting anthem recommending that Gary reach for the stars. He stayed in the back room of the garage drinking his tea.

He was only summoned out by the beeping of the dashboard. He walked back out to the counter and authorised a petrol purchase. He then glanced up to look at the car that was requesting it. It was nobody he knew. Acting against his will, Gary's eyes flicked to the point that he had seen the shadow figure. Much to his relief, it was no longer there.

02.

"So I was wondering about these records," said Shelley.

Milton was dipping a biscuit into his tea, it was a generic digestive and he over-estimated its sturdiness. As he lifted it back out of the cup, the bottom half of it plopped into the tea with a splash. Milton looked up to see whether or not Shelley had noticed his misfortune but she was still talking.

"I think both you and I know that some of the records that should be there are missing."

Milton's kitchen was quiet and the noise from the television in the living room carried through into it. Milton gestured his head towards the sound.

"Not all the records contain information that is pertinent to witch hunting," he told her,

"Some incidents are private and confidential. I have a duty of care to protect those records that do."

"You're talking about Gary's Christening, right?"

Milton made a more successful second pass with his biscuit.

“Listen, I know you’re trying to help but as I say, some of the records have confidential information that would be tactless to release for public viewing.”

“I understand that,” Shelley replied, “but there is stuff about the witches that I really do need if we’re going to pull off Gary’s plan.”

“Specifically?”

“Specifically,” said Shelley, “the birth, marriage and death records for the parish.”

“Well, that I can give you, not in its original you understand. I have further copies.”

“What’s the big deal about me having the original?”

“If I told you that, it wouldn’t be original any more but suffice it to say there are more people in the village and its surrounding areas whose biological line is. Well, let’s just go with icky.”

“Ah,” said Shelley.

“It might cause embarrassment for the parties involved. Plus, the supplemental record book that I think you are referring to goes on right up to recent years and has both details and moral judgement on the parishioners that whilst I feel it should exist. It would be indiscreet...”

Milton couldn’t finish his sentence. Shelley’s stare was a little too cutting.

“I’ll go get you what I have,” he told her.

03.

The lamplight was low in Milton’s bedroom. Carrie got undressed and slipped into her pyjamas with her back turned to him. She buttoned her cotton pyjama top and got into bed with her back still turned to him.

“Good night then,” she said.

Assuming that Carrie was tired, Milton stripped down to his boxer shorts and turned the wall lamp off.

“Good night,” he told her.

He lay in the dark for about two minutes and then the light flicked back on.

“So that’s it then?”

Milton turned to look at Carrie. Her brows were clenched like the buttocks of a man with loose stools.

“It is late,” he told her.

“So that’s it then?” She asked.

Milton stretched his mouth in bemusement.

“Should there be more?” he asked.

“Well, you tell me,” she said, “should there?”

Milton paused, he felt quite strongly that this was either a rhetorical question or some kind of trap. Either way, it dawned on him that he was about to be in an argument.

“That’s up to you?”

He let the question hang in his accentuation and widened his eyes sheepishly.

“It’s not though, is it?”

Milton was lost, he didn’t have a reply, he wasn’t even fully sure of what he was being asked.

“Is it?”

Carrie’s voice was more firm and resolute, Milton felt the urge to resist whatever was happening but as he didn’t know what it was he had no choice but to go along with it. He shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Well let’s see, you spend the night talking to Gary’s girlfriend.”

“I’m not sure she is his...”

“Whatever she is, you left me in there watching the fucking Dirty Dozen with Dan.”

“It’s a good film,” he offered.

“It was fucking awkward, does Dan never go out?”

“You know he doesn’t.”

“Then,” said Carrie, “why don’t we ever?”

“There’s the quiz night.”

“With Dan and Gary.”

“What’s wrong with Dan and Gary?”

“Gary’s a pre-pubescent fuck-up, and Dan is a giant man baby who does nothing but suckle at your teats.”

Milton raised his arms in protest.

“Please, he’s only down the hall.”

“That’s right, we wouldn’t want to hurt Dan’s feelings, would we?”

Milton had never had an argument with Carrie before, she seemed to favour the rhetorical question in her approach. He decided to give it a go himself.

“Why would we?” he asked.

“Yeah, exactly, Dan’s feelings are paramount and I can just go to sleep. It’s fine, I’ll stop bothering you with it now.”

Carrie pulled the blanket around her neck and rolled over to face away from him again.

“You can turn the light off,” she said.

That was easy, thought Milton. Then he thought a bit more.

“It’s not really OK, is it?” he asked.

“No,” she said.

“So what’s the problem?”

Carrie began to tell him.

04.

Despite it being the middle of summer, it was surprisingly cold in the garage. Gary could see his breath, he would have put his coat on but it had been warm and sunny when he left the house and he hadn’t seen the need to bring it.

He clung to his teacup as if it were a heater. The garage heating was turned off and wouldn’t be back on until late November, what Ron described as “early autumn.”

Gary rubbed his arms and breathed into his hands. He glanced at the waste paper basket, the cigarette lighters and the array of women’s magazines with headlines such as “abused by my husband’s wife,” that Ron seemed to think were best placed next to the toddlers’ comics. He thought better of it but entertaining the idea was enough to warm his spirits a little.

The rain continued to pour against the glass, leaving it thick with condensation. Gary rubbed a rough oval with his hand and peered out at the apocalyptic thrashing of the rain. It was partially hypnotic. In the background, the radio was losing its signal in the rain and picking up the static of blanket lightening as it made brief cameos in the night sky.

As the lightening added brief viability to the land outside the forecourt, Gary thought that he caught the tiniest glimpse of a fox running a circle around the premises.

“Poor thing,” he thought, “at least I’m dry.”

The radio gave up its effort at playing what Gary thought might have been “Rat in the Kitchen” by UB40 and settled on steady static.

Gary stood and tried to retune it to something vaguely audible but it was static on every channel.

He flicked the kettle back on and went to collect his mug from the counter top.

As he did so, there above the fading oval he had made in the condensation was the following message, written in block capitals.

“YOU EAT KIWI FRUIT.”

Gary shook his head.

“For fuck’s sake,” he said aloud, “we’re not even together any more.

Gary had meant to say the sentence flippantly but as the words left his mouth he realised how much they still hurt to say. He reached up on tip toes to get to the last unmarked section of the window.

“I wasn’t scared of you when you were alive,” he wrote, “and I’m certainly not scared of you now you’re dead.”

He turned to address the empty room.

“Now fuck off,” he told it.

Gary heard a dripping sound, as if the roof had begun to leak into the middle of the shop floor. Gary stood up to look for the source of it.

There in the middle of the floor was a yellow puddle. Gary didn’t have to walk over to it to detect the ammonia scent of urine.

“Oh, very mature,” he told the ether.

05.

“My problem is,” said Carrie, “you spend more time looking after your friends than you do with me. I know you’ve known your friends longer but I was hoping there was a future in this relationship.”

“There is a future,” Milton implored.

“One that doesn’t involve living with Dan for the rest of forever.”

“First up, he’s right down the hall and secondly, it’s complicated.”

“Complicated?”

“More than you might think, I can’t just leave the guy. I just can’t.”

“Well then what about me?” Carrie asked, “can you leave me?”

“I wouldn’t want to leave you, there’s a difference.”

“So you want to leave Dan but you have to stay with him.”

“I wouldn’t put it that harshly but that’s basically the gist of it.”

“Then just tell me why, you at least owe me that.”

“It’s complicated,” he told her.

“I have all night,” she assured him.

The phone rang, Milton ignored it.

“Let it ring,” he said.

Carrie let the phone ring. It continued ringing indefinitely. She shook her head and answered it gruffly. Then held out the receiver for Milton to take.

“It’s Gary,” she told him.

06.

Shelley arranged a series of envelopes on the table. She had them labelled neatly GT, BS, HV. She was leafing through the huge pile of photocopied documents that Milton had provided her with. All she needed was dates of birth for the Bellows sisters. By eliminating date ranges it took less time than she had expected.

There were a lot of listings for the Bellows family spanning centuries. Each with a clear parental line marked. The dates of birth and Sarah and Ruth were easy to establish. Sarah was a summer season witch, so there was a good chance that they could kill her on the solstice day.

Shelley underlined the date of birth in neat pencil. She felt like high fiving herself, instead she grabbed at glass of white wine and took a celebratory gulp.

She carried on leafing through the pages and underlined another entry. The name Geraldine Bellows had been entered without a date of birth or either mother or father being listed. The entry was in a notably different and more simplistic script than the rest of the entries. Shelley wrote the word “anomaly” next to it and made a mental note to flag it with Milton at a later point.

Shelley planned to map out the rest of the Bellows line but the Geraldine entry seemed to be the last mention of them.

Satisfied, Shelley numbered the pages and made a few notes about the significance of each page. Then she skipped forward a couple of centuries to the birth of Gary Turlough.

07.

Carrie waved a smudge stick around the garage. The thick incense that it released infused the air with a musky Congregational cloud that struggled to get past the nostrils and into the lungs.

Gary was sat quietly behind the counter, trying to be as little of a nuisance as possible. Behind him the radio was giving out static, Carrie had told them they would know that the cleansing had worked if it came back on properly. Gary suspected that it might just be broken.

“It’s not you,” whispered Milton, “I think I’ve done something.”

“But you don’t know,” Gary whispered back.

“No idea,” said Milton.

“Then it’s either something you did ages ago, something you forgot to do or something that you’re supposed to do in the future.”

“What the fuck kind of chance does that give me?” Milton hissed.

“In my experience, none.”

Carrie crossed her arms and looked over at them.

“Not to interrupt you two but I think I’m finished.”

Gary listened carefully, the radio was playing a song about wanting something else to get through a semi-charmed kind of life. It was a song that he actually quite liked for a change.

“Thank you, I couldn’t be doing with cleaning up ghost urine,” Gary told them, “Sorry if I timed that badly.”

“No worries,” Milton said.

Carrie’s lips narrowed.

“What’s going on, Gary?”

“What do you mean?”

Milton was impressed by Gary’s instinct to answer the question with a question.

“Don’t answer a question with a question,” said Carrie.

“That’s just cheating,” thought Milton.

“You’re not normally scared of ghosts and this doesn’t seem like regular ghost behaviour.”

“Which we cannot confirm is even a thing,” said Milton, “I still say it’s witchcraft.”

“Words that I would usually expect to hear from Gary,” said Carrie.

Gary opened his mouth and inhaled but couldn’t quite managed to form words. Seeing a window to placate Carrie by sending his friend down the river, just a tiny bit, Milton joined the cause.

“Yes, Gary, you need to give us a clearer picture, this could be important to the hunt and you know how suspect Dan will be about it.”

At the mention of the word Dan a dark shadow passed over Carrie’s face.

“Oh yeah Gary and wouldn’t want to upset Dan,” Carrie told him.

“OK, here’s the thing. When we were at Julie’s house, the spirit well sent through a threatening note to Alison.”

“Do you still have it?” Milton asked.

Gary nodded, hesitated, and continued.

“And I spoke to Paul the other day, he’s been getting them too. He thinks they’re from Saul.”

“And is that what you think?” Carrie asked.

“I have to at least consider the possibility. I mean, you remember what a pain in the arse he was as a powerless thug. Just imagine what he’s going to be like as a ghost, he’s already pissed on the floor.”

“It might not be him,” said Carrie, “is there anything else you can tell us?”

Gary thought about the black apparition he had seen the night that Saul died, the one he had seen only an hour before.

“No, that’s all I’ve got,” he told them.

“If you think of anything, let us know,” said Carrie.

Carrie walked out and opened the car with her electronic key.

“You better go, mate, thanks,” said Gary.

“No problems,” sighed Milton.

“Oh, and I think whatever your problem is might have something to do with Dan.”

Milton nodded with the slow acceptance of a condemned man acquiescing to the noose.

08.

Julie woke from a long sleep, she was relieved to find herself both alive and undefiled. She tried her bedroom door handle and much to her dismay found it to still be firmly barred.

She beat her fist against it in frustration but there was no budging the thing.

Feeling the strain of suppressed human bodily functions, Julie pulled her bed over to the window and sat glaring through it, hoping that someone, anyone, might be out in the worst rain storm she had ever seen and might see her waving for help.

09.

There was nothing there, Shelley had looked, checked and double checked: None of the pertinent information surrounding Gary’s birth was available. That wasn’t going to stop a researcher of her calibre however and she had very easily located Gary’s mother. She had known that she lived on the Island of Saint Helena but it had taken a while for her to realise that her surname wasn’t Turlough, it was Bellows.

She wasn’t sure of it of course, it was a risk but she had other resources to hand. With that in mind, she had dialled her cousin Alison, invited her to stay and artfully steered the conversation to Gary’s idiocy. She progressed from there to speculations about how he was raised and finally managed to pluck his mother’s first name from Alison without so much as asking. It was easy.

Now she sat with a pencil, an open laptop and the numbers 290, the dialling code for Saint Helena, Ascension, and Tristan da Cunha.

Shelley picked up the phone and began to dial a very long sequence of digits.

10.

The wind blew hard and the rain came down in a way that was entirely consistent with it being a storm. Through the melodramatic flashes of lightening and their percussive thundery backing section walked a black robed figure as holy and enchanted as e’er beneath the waning moon was haunted. Of course, once you got close up, it was just Paul fed up of being stuck in the house with his mum who wouldn’t allow the television on during the bad weather for fear that the lightening would strike a power cable and burst into their living room like cathode dynamite. She was fine about him going out to walk in it, so long as he didn’t stand under trees or carry an umbrella.

He had tried other things for entertainment of course, his first port of call had been to phone Tajel only to be told by her mother that she was “in the bath.” When he had pressed Mrs Patel for a specific time to call back, she had become quite stern and told him that Tajel would be

going straight out after the bath and he could speak to her tomorrow. He might have assumed it was just a disapproving mother not wanting a male suitor bothering her daughter but then as he had left the house, Tajel had passed him in a car full of her friends.

He couldn't tell which one of them she was kissing but it was pretty obvious she was kissing one of them.

Paul longed for a car to drive by and splash up the water from a puddle. However, with the driving rain alone, he was sufficiently wet enough.

He pulled up his hood and watched the rain trickle off the peak and down onto his nose.

He passed warm looking house after warm looking house and he tried to enjoy his mage like oneness with the elements. It was a stretch but there was nothing on TV that night anyway.

Paul looked up to the flashes in the sky and tried to feel the power of the thunder in his chest. It caused the rain to directly hit him in the face and his eyes to blink closed.

He was just about to give up when he noticed movement in one of the upstairs windows.

The silhouette of a young woman was waving through a window. He noticed the word "HELP" written in what he assumed to be blood.

Heroically, he ran to do the first thing that occurred to him. He knocked on the front door.

11.

There was nobody in the garage for the after pub-rush for snacks that Gary was accustomed to between the hours of 11.30pm and 12.30pm. Gary felt the damp of the rain outside sinking into his bones.

He put his head down on the counter and wrapped his arms together as tight as possible. He had turned the radio off when the one station that was coming in announced a four-hour tribute to the songs of Elvis. Now there was only the static of the rain, punctuated by the occasional glass rattling gust of wind.

As Gary's eyes began to sink closed, his body began to feel warmer. Another sound began to fade over the rain, the slow crackle of flames over wood.

Gary did not open his eyes but he could see the flames in his dream, a perfect circle, warming him, protecting him, allowing him to safely sleep. And he could see the fox, just outside of the circle standing guard.

It was 5am before the dashboard woke him with its infernal beeping and for the first time since he had been back on night shifts, he felt like a human being.

12.

"Why are we ordering breakfast in the middle of the night?" Milton asked.

“Because, it’s the only thing on the menu that’s vaguely edible,” Carrie told him.

“We could have gone to the burger place.”

“No, I needed a proper pot of tea for this.”

“We could have done it at home,” Milton protested.

“We couldn’t do it at your home because precious Dan might be listening and we couldn’t do it at my home because I don’t want to annoy my neighbours any more than I already have by keeping your bloody rooster in the back garden.”

Milton thought about it for a moment.

“Yeah, thanks for that,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” said Carrie, “Now tell me what’s so bloody special about Dan.”

The café at the motorway service station was a dull affair, beige walls, beige tables and tables of beige menu items that all basically amounted to cooked English breakfast.

The two waitresses, who were in their late fifties, stood next to the kitchen, in their beige uniforms, gossiping and looking equal parts disinterested and disaffected by the arrival of customers.

“I suppose, if we are going to make this work it is only fair to tell you,” said Milton, “I have never told anyone though.”

Carrie nodded but didn’t interrupt, she placed a reassuring hand on Milton’s arm. He took a deep breath.

“Come on then,” he said more to himself than to Carrie.

“What can I get you?”

The stickish waitress spoke with a brackish tone, her thin face not quite contemptuous but indifferent enough to be close.

Carrie cast a cursory glance at the menu options.

“Two mega-breakers and two pots of tea for two please,” she said.

“Is that two pots of tea or a pot of tea for two?” asked the waitress.

“Two pots of tea,” said Carrie.

The waitress made a note of their order and went back to talk to her friend.

“So go on then,” prompted Carrie.

Milton took another deep breath and psyched himself up a second time. He glanced over the table and into Carrie's wide and expectant eyes.

"Dan's father and mine were both in the hunt," he told her, "Dan used to come over to mine and play with Lego whenever they went out together."

Carrie nodded for him to continue.

"Anyway, I had this Lego Technic set, it was a new thing then, with pneumatics and cogs. My dad thought it might make me interested in science."

"Did it?"

"It didn't even make me interested in building it, Dan loved it though. He had lain out all the pieces in precise order and made a good start. I was reading an Eagle comic. I resented Dan for sharing his name with the pilot of the future."

"Go on," said Carrie.

"That was when I heard my dad get back, he called me. His voice was so calm.

I walked into the kitchen and he was stood there wrestling with Dan's dad. he asked me to hold the door closed, said he didn't want Dan to see him like that."

"Let me guess, eyes rolled back in his head, ready to kill."

"You've seen it?" Milton asked.

"I didn't get in to the hunt for nothing," she said.

Carrie quantified the remark with a glance that seemed to suggest it was a story for another time and Milton should finish his first.

"Dad was trying to shake him out of the spell, he pushed him backwards and reached into the drawer for some holy salts."

"You kept them in the kitchen?"

"Dad took them after every hunt, to be on the safe side."

Carrie nodded.

"You have to understand, Dan's dad... He wasn't like Dan, he was ex-army but tough ex-army, none of that embarrassing stuff with the cat. He was a big man, not flabby, big.

As my dad reached in for the holy salts, Dan's dad knocked him over, grabbed a knife from the drawer. I don't know how my dad rolled out of the way but he did and made it back on to his feet. He grabbed an old cast iron flat we used as a doorstop and swung it at Mr Proctor, the point caught him right on the side of the head and he dropped the knife."

“What happened?”

“I was eight, Carrie, I was only eight, it was my dad.”

Milton was breathing heavily, his face red, tears beading out of the corners of his eyes.

There was sudden clank of crockery as the waitress put the tea down in front of them.

“We’ve got no cooked tomatoes, is that alright?”

Carrie told her it was fine and Milton watched her until she was out of earshot.

“He had my dad by the throat, dad was flailing wildly with the iron but Dan’s dad didn’t seem to notice. His bulk was holding my dad down, my dad’s face was turning blue and the sound he made...”

Carrie took Milton’s hand and squeezed it tightly.

“I thought maybe because his eyes were white, if I hurt his eyes he would get better but the knife was on the other side of them and I wasn’t strong enough to hit him. I picked up the holy salts and threw them on him, my dad had stopped moving. Dan’s dad turned and ran at me, the salts did that much.”

Milton shakily poured himself a cup of tea, stopping to add all the packets of sugar that had come on the tray.

“It gets a bit fuzzy after that, he chased me around a bit and I found myself on the floor reaching out for a knife I was nowhere near. Then I saw my dad, back on his feet. The iron found its mark that time. Dan’s dad fell to his knees and my dad hit him again.

My dad told me he was unconscious, told me to say nothing about it but to keep Dan upstairs. He phoned the Vicar, he was the other hunt member, they interred the body at the church, last rites and all that. Back then, the hunt was a bigger deal, the local doctor signed the death certificate with cause of death being, head injury following cardiac arrest. They told Dan that the witches got him and they reassured me the same. It was all because of the witches, he was possessed. We’d done our best to save him.”

Carrie nodded.

“I never bought that though and when my dad died, I got a small fortune whereas Dan’s legacy was a mental breakdown and dishonourable discharge.”

“That’s why you look after him?”

“When I got back to the room, Dan was still building the Lego, he held up a grey brick and he said, see if you can find another one of these. That was it. Everything else was cleared up by the hunt. I know this isn’t your fault, I’m really trying my best to do both, I mean, do the best,” he told her.

When the food arrived, Milton was unsurprised to discover that the mega-brecker did not live up to its hyperbolic moniker.

13.

Whenever Paul had been locked out of his mother's house he had climbed over the back gate and looked for an open window. He did that at Julie's house and was pleased to discover a small window leading into a downstairs toilet. He attempted to get through it head first, squeezing the top half of his body through the tiny hole. His shoulders proved to be too wide for the opening, although he did successfully manage to rip his coat on the window latch.

He tried going in leg first, slipping his entire right leg through the window and realising that there was no way he could plausibly get his other leg through, or get down from the window without falling. As he pulled his leg back out, he pressed one of his testes against the window sill and fell hard against the floor.

After what seemed like minutes (but was in fact about five seconds) Paul stood again and decided he would have to break the back door down. He turned the handle to see how sturdy it was and was both pleasantly surprised and suitably embarrassed to find it unlocked.

Once he was in the house, Paul sprinted up the stairs and after going into the toilet and a broom cupboard, he flung open Julie's door.

Julie saw him filling the doorway, his coat ripped, his face flushed, water dripping off his sleeves and a steeled determination carved into his face.

She leapt off her bed.

"Thank you for saving me," she said.

Paul looked around the tidy bedroom and then into Julie's grateful eyes.

"From what?" Paul asked.

14.

The rain had petered off by the time Gary's shift had finished. He walked home in the fresh ion filled post storm warmth of a summer morning, feeling refreshed and ready to drink in front of the television.

Shelley had filled the kitchen table with papers, she had obviously fallen asleep in front of them and could be seen to be rubbing her eyes as he walked in to the kitchen.

"Morning," he said, "how's the dissertation going?"

"We'll see," she said, "I've uncovered a few interesting bits and bobs."

"Good stuff," he said, "can I make you anything?"

Gary left a lingering intonation of doubt in the question and internally crossed his fingers that she would say no.

“I’m not hungry,” she told him.

Gary pulled a bottle of whiskey from the cabinet and poured himself a glass.

“It’s only morning if you haven’t been at work,” he told her.

“Sounds good,” she replied.

He poured a second glass and took it over to her.

“Good news,” she said, “Ruth Bellows was born in June, that means she’s a summer witch.”

“OK,” said Gary.

“That means she is most vulnerable on Mid Summer’s day, in the light of the noon sun. She her soul tree can be bound with a silver thread and she’ll lose her power.”

“Do we have silver thread?”

“Yeah, I’ve ordered some online,” she told him.

“Great news,” he said, “do you think it will break the spell?”

“There’s a fifty-fifty chance,” she told him.

Gary nodded meaningfully.

“I’ve got everyone on board, all of the hunt. I’ve even asked Alison to come down.”

“Alison? Won’t that be a little bit awkward.”

“Maybe for you, besides we might be able to talk her into a threesome.”

“What? Really?”

“Don’t be grim, she’s my cousin. Dirty boy.”

“You suggested it,” said Gary.

“I was joking,” she said, “I didn’t know you were into threesomes.”

“I’m not, it’s going to be hard enough talking to you both.”

“That’s my boy,” she told him.

Shelley gulped down her whiskey. Her lips pulled to one side in impish mischief.

“Now,” she said, “did you know your mum’s name was Bellows?”

“It would be pretty hard to write to her if I didn’t. Besides half the bloody village is called Bellows. Bellows or Fuller. It’s not the world’s deepest gene pool. I’m lucky, my dad was some passing hobo from the sound of it but at least he had enough ‘stranger’ DNA in him to avoid me getting webbed feet.”

“Does your mum have webbed feet?”

“I’ve never seen her feet, she always kept them covered. I assumed they were webbed, they might have been cloven for all I know.”

“Weird,” Shelley observed.

“It might just have been because we couldn’t afford to put the heating on much. I’ve never really thought about it.”

“Anyway, Alison will be here to help. No threesomes, it was her idea.”

“Was it her who told you about my mum?”

“Parish records,” she told him.

“Bloody Milton,” said Gary.

“Academic interest,” said Shelley, “besides you don’t want to be stuck in this village forever.”

“Fair enough,” said Gary, “thank you.”

Another, even more impish expression passed across Shelley’s face. Her sing song voice took on a childish tone:

“Thank me, thank me, now you’ve gotta wank me.”

“What? Really?” Gary asked.

“We’ll see,” she told him.

Shelley stood up and led Gary to the bedroom by the hand.

15.

The living room of Julie’s mother’s house was compact and extremely tidy. Paul had spent the night sleeping on the couch because it had taken both him and Julie’s mother a good while to establish what had actually happened. Neither of them were entirely sure, Paul felt as if he had been invited to stay only so that an eye could be kept on him. Although, he wasn’t entirely sure why he had accepted the invitation.

Julie appeared to be sleeping late. Meanwhile, Paul (who still had to go home, get changed and get to work) was sat awkwardly holding a tray with a bowl of Sugar Puffs on it. The options had been those or Bran Flakes. They were a tiny bit stale and Paul was doing his best not to notice.

Julie's mother walked into the room, Paul had spent an hour of the previous night "chatting" to her father in a way that seemed to suggest he was applying for a job vacancy he hadn't known existed. Julie's mother looked like an older version of Julie, a little round about the middle, heavy at the top, short cropped hair, and an infectious smile.

"Well, I don't think Julie's up to coming down. But I'm sure she wants to thank you again for saving her last night."

Paul pursed his lips to hide his continued confusion.

"It was really nothing."

"No, no, come on, you ripped that nice jacket of yours."

This was true, even Paul could accept that as, if not heroic, maybe altruistic.

"And I just wanted to add how happy we are that she's finally found a nice local boy."

"Erm, thanks," said Paul.

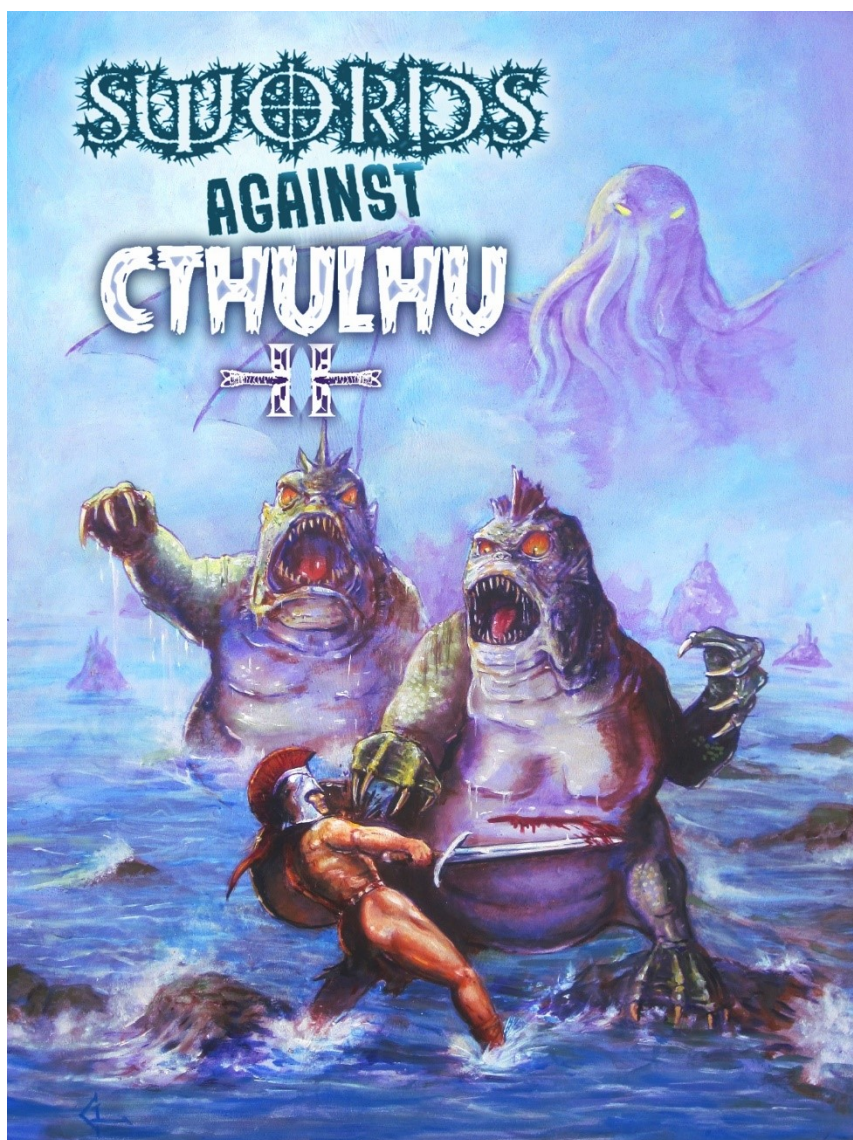
"She might not know it yet but stick with it, we're behind you."

Paul could feel the intense crimson of his blush covering his face.

"Ah, look at you," continued Julie's mother, "you will come around for dinner tonight, won't you? Just to check up on her."

Paul nodded his assent. He wondered what Julie would make of what her mother was saying and for the first time, he began to wonder what he made of Julie.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO by Gregory KH Bryant

Episode Twenty-Four

Thinking that Turhan Mot might still be clinging to life somewhere in the shattered nose of the “Grand Marquis” Yamir ordered his ship, the “Reliant”, to close in on the staggering ruins. But now the “Bellerophon” which had been eluding the barrages of both enemy ships was facing only a single enemy.

Colonel’s Westland’s vengeance was swift and furious.

“Direct all fire upon that ship,” he ordered, indicating the “Reliant”. “Hit it with everything. Blast those bastards to oblivion.”

Huge fusillades from the “Bellerophon’s” plasma cannons and laser cannons filled the sky above Callisto. The “Reliant” took ceaseless hits. It shuddered from stem to stern.

Yamir’s adjutants upon the bridge of the “Reliant” cast him worried glances.

“O my Captain?” his first lieutenant asked, feeling the responsibility to speak for the crew.

Yamir returned his lieutenant’s look. He came to an instant decision.

“Lock on to the “Grand Marquis” ... what is left of it. If my brother, Turhan Mot, yet lives, I would speak to him myself. Late he was to the battle. We lost many of our own people on that cause, and I shall know the why of it.”

“Aye, my Captain,” the lieutenant answered. He forwarded the order.

“And let us take leave of this place, now,” Yamir finished, when once his crew had locked on to the ruins of the “Grand Marquis”. They were ready to tow the ruined ship.

“And those we leave at the battle?” his lieutenant asked.

“They came all of their own accord. Scroungers all, none of them is of our own crew. I must take heed to the welfare of my own ship, and the men and women upon it.”

So Yamir pulled the “Reliant” about, turning into deep space, and dragging the ruined forward section of the “Grand Marquis”.

Seeing the ship turn to flight, Colonel Westland did not stop the fury of his barrages against it.

“Keep firing,” he ordered. “And follow those bastards until I give other orders. We’ll either destroy that ship and every living thing on it, or we will cripple it. We’ll do everything we can to leave it derelict.

With the large ships now out of the fight, the battle in the skies above Callisto was left to an uncountable series of dogfights between the smaller fighter ships left behind. The Scroungers, of course, were desperate. There was no return to the “Bellerophon”. And the “Yamir”, built as a transport and trading ship had no flight deck to accommodate the pursuit craft the dying “Bellerophon” had abandoned.

So Lieutenant Hardy and his fighters found themselves confronting an enemy more deadly, more vicious than any they had before. These Scroungers had already counted themselves dead. They had nothing to lose, and they threw themselves at Lieutenant Hardy’s fighters with the sole intent of killing as many as they could before they died themselves.

Laser cannons traced brilliant, deadly lines of crimson across the sky. Hardy himself, like his fighters, had only his own eyes and the intelligence of his ship to tell him how the battle was unfolding. All communications between the Callistoan forces was even yet silenced. No direct signals between ships were allowed.

But Hardy saw the destruction of the “Grand Marquis”, and he saw the “Bellerophon” pursuing the other ship, the “Reliant”, with all its cannons blazing. Hardy understood that by default, he was now in command of Earth Space Forces fighting over the bases on Callisto.

His first decision was to open subspace communications between his fighters.

“RD01 here,” he said, using his code number, and knowing, even using subspace communications the chances were good that the Scroungers’ ships were also picking up his signals.

“The field is ours, boys and girls. Let me hear some numbers. Over.”

“CP01,” or ‘Combat Patrol 01’, came an answer.

“CP06.”

“CP12.”

“CP18.”

And so on, until, at ‘CP88’, the roster was finished. Gaps in the numbers indicated to Hardy the ships that had been lost. He’d lost over a third of the fighters that had followed him from the flight deck of the “Bellerophon”. Now, to get a reading on the size of the enemy.

“Roger that,” he answered, in a flat voice. “Regroup at Cannibal Field. Kill on sight.” ‘Cannibal Field’ was that day’s code name for Callisto Base 1.

On his way to Callisto Base 1, per orders, Lieutenant Danton hurtled through space in his tiny pursuit ship, one of the ‘mice’ shipped out from the “Bellerophon”, and finally got his first shot in. It was a Scrounger transport, one large enough to carry a crew of six. The transport had been fitted with plasma cannons, and, when the gunners saw Danton approaching in his tiny craft, they began firing furiously.

But Danton had trained well on his ship, and dodging like a wasp among raindrops, he handily eluded the enemy fire. He hit the transport with his newly invented hyper-laser cannon. It instantly burned a hole completely through the ship, nor did the crew inside have time to respond.

They say only a fuming red beam slice easily through the bulkhead of their ship, cutting a winding path which followed Danton's own complicated manoeuvres as he eluded their fire. The beam cut three of them, a gunner, the pilot, and the co-pilot into several bloodied chunks that bounced about the bridge.

And then, with the huge explosion of oxygen escaping from the ship, the transport blew up into countless shards.

Danton, having tasted his first sip of revenge for the Scrounger's attack on IPS-3 flew through the cloud of spinning wreckage, continuing to Callisto Base 1. His face was grim.

Captain Waverly, half his face burned off in the Scrounger's first attack against Callisto Base 1, held a tentative line of resistance. With him were twelve men and women of Callisto Security, every one of them wounded in some fashion. Bandages and burns covered their bodies, where their charred uniforms left them exposed.

They blocked the corridor leading to the railway that, in turn, led to Callisto Base 1 itself, some miles away from the Space port. With a haphazard barrier of desks, chairs and file cabinets hastily thrown together from material within the railway offices, they had afforded themselves some small protection against the Scrounger's guns.

The Scroungers, on the other hand, had but the long empty barrier ahead, with nothing to offer them protection from Captain Waverley's guns.

After several of them had run headlong into the hallway, only to be easily gunned down, they stopped to regroup. Several gave swift and darting glances around the corner, provoking an instant barrage of laser fire.

"They got a wall they built," explained one of the Scroungers, who had risked his head to peek around the corner. "And they're hiding behind it."

As the Scroungers huddled, discussing their move, more and more Scroungers came from the ceaseless battles outside, adding to their numbers. Together, they were not long in putting together a plan.

"Let's some a' you guys go back to the Landing Bay and strip off the bulkheads of their ships. We'll carry them like big shields, and push on through those grunts."

They were quick to carry out the plan, and in very few short minutes, they had cobbled together a number of wall-sized shields that they could push before them as they marched forward towards Waverley's position.

“What’re they doing, cap’n?” came the question from one of his corporals.

“They have built a shield,” he said. “They are hiding behind it.”

The heavy wall, pushed by a dozen pairs of hands, marched forward.

Waverly hazarded a shot from his laser pistol. It singed a futile trail across the advancing wall.

He looked behind him. The hall opened directly onto the platform where the rail cars loaded passengers bound for Callisto Base 1.

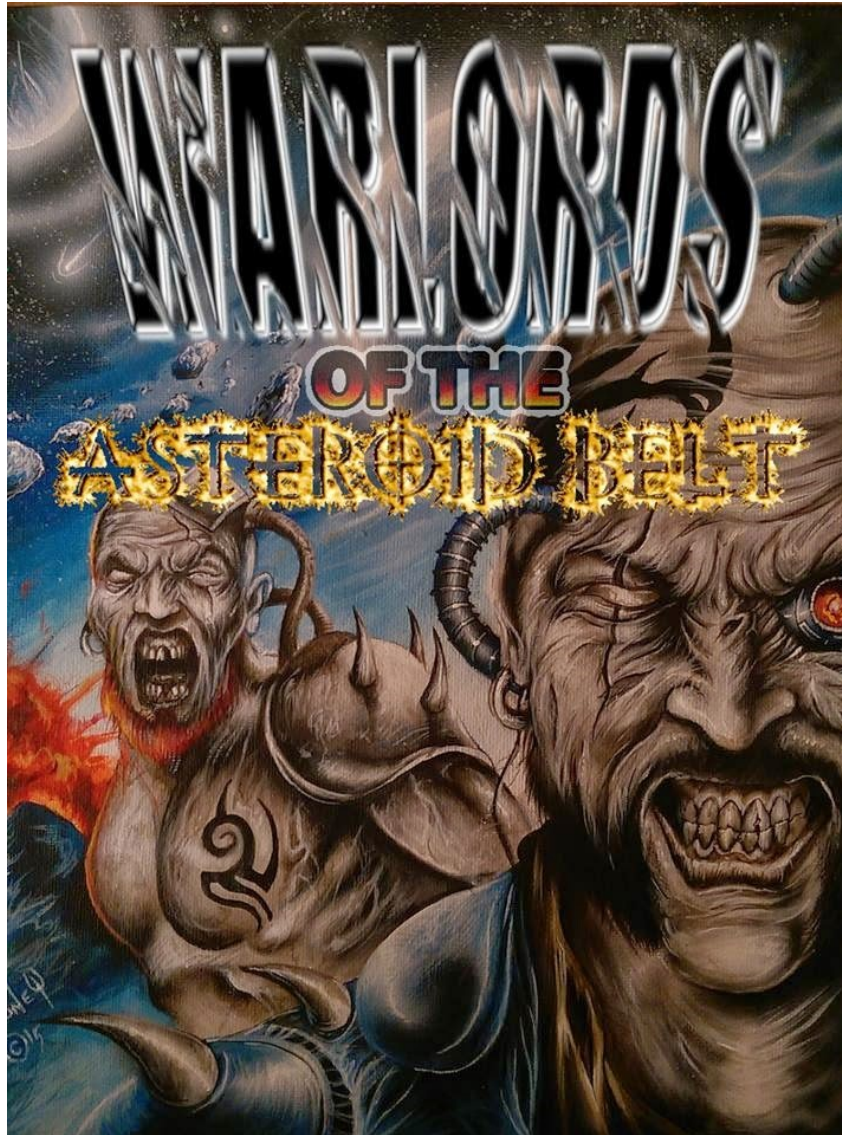
Past that, there was nothing, except for the sparse and hopelessly outnumbered forces of Callisto Base Security to protect the base.

“What’ll we do, cap’n?” asked the same corporal.

“We’ll hold this position.”

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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



Out now from [Rogue Planet Press](#).

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THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND by Jules Verne

Part 3. The Secret of the Island

Chapter 10

Of the convicts, the dangers which menaced Granite House, the ruins with which the plateau was covered, the colonists thought no longer. Herbert's critical state outweighed all other considerations. Would the removal prove fatal to him by causing some internal injury? The reporter could not affirm it, but he and his companions almost despaired of the result. The cart was brought to the bend of the river. There some branches, disposed as a liner, received the mattress on which lay the unconscious Herbert. Ten minutes after, Cyrus Harding, Spilett, and Pencroft were at the foot of the cliff, leaving Neb to take the cart on to the plateau of Prospect Heights. The lift was put in motion, and Herbert was soon stretched on his bed in Granite House.

What cares were lavished on him to bring him back to life! He smiled for a moment on finding himself in his room, but could scarcely even murmur a few words, so great was his weakness. Gideon Spilett examined his wounds. He feared to find them reopened, having been imperfectly healed. There was nothing of the sort. From whence, then, came this prostration? why was Herbert so much worse? The lad then fell into a kind of feverish sleep, and the reporter and Pencroft remained near the bed. During this time, Harding told Neb all that had happened at the corral, and Neb recounted to his master the events of which the plateau had just been the theatre.

It was only during the preceding night that the convicts had appeared on the edge of the forest, at the approaches to Creek Glycerine. Neb, who was watching near the poultry-yard, had not hesitated to fire at one of the pirates, who was about to cross the stream; but in the darkness he could not tell whether the man had been hit or not. At any rate, it was not enough to frighten away the band, and Neb had only just time to get up to Granite House, where at least he was in safety.

But what was he to do there? How prevent the devastations with which the convicts threatened the plateau? Had Neb any means by which to warn his master? And, besides, in what situation were the inhabitants of the corral themselves? Cyrus Harding and his companions had left on the 11th of November, and it was now the 29th. It was, therefore, nineteen days since Neb had had other news than that brought by Top—disastrous news: Ayrton disappeared, Herbert severely wounded, the engineer, reporter, and sailor, as it were, imprisoned in the corral!

What was he to do? asked poor Neb. Personally he had nothing to fear, for the convicts could not reach him in Granite House. But the buildings, the plantations, all their arrangements at the mercy of the pirates! Would it not be best to let Cyrus Harding judge of what he ought to do, and to warn him, at least, of the danger which threatened him?

Neb then thought of employing Jup, and confiding a note to him. He knew the orang's great intelligence, which had been often put to the proof. Jup understood the word corral, which had been frequently pronounced before him, and it may be remembered, too, that he had often driven the cart thither in company with Pencroft. Day had not yet dawned. The active

orang would know how to pass unperceived through the woods, of which the convicts, besides, would think he was a native.

Neb did not hesitate. He wrote the note, he tied it to Jup's neck, he brought the ape to the door of Granite House, from which he let down a long cord to the ground; then, several times he repeated these words, —

“Jup Jup! corral, corral!”

The creature understood, seized the cord, glided rapidly down the beach, and disappeared in the darkness without the convicts' attention having been in the least excited.

“You did well, Neb,” said Harding, “but perhaps in not warning us you would have done still better!”

And, in speaking thus, Cyrus Harding thought of Herbert, whose recovery the removal had so seriously checked.

Neb ended his account. The convicts had not appeared at all on the beach. Not knowing the number of the island's inhabitants, they might suppose that Granite House was defended by a large party. They must have remembered that during the attack by the brig numerous shot had been fired both from the lower and upper rocks, and no doubt they did not wish to expose themselves. But the plateau of Prospect Heights was open to them, and not covered by the fire of Granite House. They gave themselves up, therefore, to their instinct of destruction, — plundering, burning, devastating everything, —and only retiring half an hour before the arrival of the colonists, whom they believed still confined in the corral.

On their retreat, Neb hurried out. He climbed the plateau at the risk of being perceived and fired at, tried to extinguish the fire which was consuming the buildings of the poultry-yard, and had struggled, though in vain, against it until the cart appeared at the edge of the wood.

Such had been these serious events. The presence of the convicts constituted a permanent source of danger to the settlers in Lincoln Island, until then so happy, and who might now expect still greater misfortunes.

Spilett remained in Granite House with Herbert and Pencroft, while Cyrus Harding, accompanied by Neb, proceeded to judge for himself of the extent of the disaster.

It was fortunate that the convicts had not advanced to the foot of Granite House. The workshop at the Chimneys would in that case not have escaped destruction. But after all, this evil would have been more easily reparable than the ruins accumulated on the plateau of Prospect Heights. Harding and Neb proceeded towards the Mercy, and ascended its left bank without meeting with any trace of the convicts; nor on the other side of the river, in the depths of the wood, could they perceive any suspicious indications.

Besides, it might be supposed that in all probability either the convicts knew of the return of the settlers to Granite House, by having seen them pass on the road from the corral, or, after the devastation of the plateau, they had penetrated into Jacamar Wood, following the course of the Mercy, and were thus ignorant of their return.

In the former case, they must have returned towards the corral, now without defenders, and which contained valuable stores.

In the latter, they must have regained their encampment, and would wait on opportunity to recommence the attack.

It was, therefore, possible to prevent them, but any enterprise to clear the island was now rendered difficult by reason of Herbert's condition. Indeed, their whole force would have been barely sufficient to cope with the convicts, and just now no one could leave Granite House.

The engineer and Neb arrived on the plateau. Desolation reigned everywhere. The fields had been trampled over; the ears of wheat, which were nearly full-grown, lay on the ground. The other plantations had not suffered less.

The kitchen-garden was destroyed. Happily, Granite House possessed a store of seed which would enable them to repair these misfortunes.

As to the wall and buildings of the poultry-yard and the onagers stable, the fire had destroyed all. A few terrified creatures roamed over the plateau. The birds, which during the fire had taken refuge on the waters of the lake, had already returned to their accustomed spot, and were dabbling on the banks. Everything would have to be reconstructed.

Cyrus Harding's face, which was paler than usual, expressed an internal anger which he commanded with difficulty, but he did not utter a word. Once more he looked at his devastated fields, and at the smoke which still rose from the ruins, then he returned to Granite House.

The following days were the saddest of any that the colonists had passed on the island! Herbert's weakness visibly increased. It appeared that a more serious malady, the consequence of the profound physiological disturbance he had gone through, threatened to declare itself, and Gideon Spilett feared such an aggravation of his condition that he would be powerless to fight against it!

In fact, Herbert remained in an almost continuous state of drowsiness, and symptoms of delirium began to manifest themselves. Refreshing drinks were the only remedies at the colonists' disposal. The fever was not as yet very high, but it soon appeared that it would probably recur at regular intervals. Gideon Spilett first recognized this on the 6th of December.

The poor boy, whose fingers, nose, and ears had become extremely pale, was at first seized with slight shiverings, horripilations, and tremblings. His pulse was weak and irregular, his skin dry, his thirst intense. To this soon succeeded a hot fit; his face became flushed; his skin reddened; his pulse quick; then a profuse perspiration broke out after which the fever seemed to diminish. The attack had lasted nearly five hours.

Gideon Spilett had not left Herbert, who, it was only too certain, was now seized by an intermittent fever, and this fever must be cured at any cost before it should assume a more serious aspect.

“And in order to cure it,” said Spilett to Cyrus Harding, “we need a febrifuge.”

“A febrifuge—” answered the engineer. “We have neither Peruvian bark, nor sulphate of quinine.”

“No,” said Gideon Spilett, “but there are willows on the border of the lake, and the bark of the willow might, perhaps, prove to be a substitute for quinine.”

“Let us try it without losing a moment,” replied Cyrus Harding.

The bark of the willow has, indeed, been justly considered as a succedaneum for Peruvian bark, as has also that of the horse-chestnut tree, the leaf of the holly, the snake-root, etc. It was evidently necessary to make trial of this substance, although not so valuable as Peruvian bark, and to employ it in its natural state, since they had no means for extracting its essence.

Cyrus Harding went himself to cut from the trunk of a species of black willow, a few pieces of bark; he brought them back to Granite House, and reduced them to a powder, which was administered that same evening to Herbert.

The night passed without any important change. Herbert was somewhat delirious, but the fever did not reappear in the night, and did not return either during the following day.

Pencroft again began to hope. Gideon Spilett said nothing. It might be that the fever was not quotidian, but tertian, and that it would return next day. Therefore, he awaited the next day with the greatest anxiety.

It might have been remarked besides that during this period Herbert remained utterly prostrate, his head weak and giddy. Another symptom alarmed the reporter to the highest degree. Herbert’s liver became congested, and soon a more intense delirium showed that his brain was also affected.

Gideon Spilett was overwhelmed by this new complication. He took the engineer aside.

“It is a malignant fever,” said he.

“A malignant fever!” cried Harding. “You are mistaken, Spilett. A malignant fever does not declare itself spontaneously; its germ must previously have existed.”

“I am not mistaken,” replied the reporter. “Herbert no doubt contracted the germ of this fever in the marshes of the island. He has already had one attack; should a second come on and should we not be able to prevent a third, he is lost.”

“But the willow bark?”

“That is insufficient,” answered the reporter, “and the third attack of a malignant fever, which is not arrested by means of quinine, is always fatal.”

Fortunately, Pencroft heard nothing of this conversation or he would have gone mad.

It may be imagined what anxiety the engineer and the reporter suffered during the day of the 7th of December and the following night.

Towards the middle of the day the second attack came on. The crisis was terrible. Herbert felt himself sinking. He stretched his arms towards Cyrus Harding, towards Spilett, towards Pencroft. He was so young to die! The scene was heart-rending. They were obliged to send Pencroft away.

The fit lasted five hours. It was evident that Herbert could not survive a third.

The night was frightful. In his delirium Herbert uttered words which went to the hearts of his companions. He struggled with the convicts, he called to Ayrton, he poured forth entreaties to that mysterious being, —that powerful unknown protector, —whose image was stamped upon his mind; then he again fell into a deep exhaustion which completely prostrated him. Several times Gideon Spilett thought that the poor boy was dead.

The next day, the 8th of December, was but a succession of the fainting fits. Herbert's thin hands clutched the sheets. They had administered further doses of pounded bark, but the reporter expected no result from it.

"If before tomorrow morning we have not given him a more energetic febrifuge," said the reporter, "Herbert will be dead."

Night arrived—the last night, it was too much to be feared, of the good, brave, intelligent boy, so far in advance of his years, and who was loved by all as their own child. The only remedy which existed against this terrible malignant fever, the only specific which could overcome it, was not to be found in Lincoln Island.

During the night of the 8th of December, Herbert was seized by a more violent delirium. His liver was fearfully congested, his brain affected, and already it was impossible for him to recognize any one.

Would he live until the next day, until that third attack which must infallibly carry him off? It was not probable. His strength was exhausted, and in the intervals of fever he lay as one dead.

Towards three o'clock in the morning Herbert uttered a piercing cry. He seemed to be torn by a supreme convulsion. Neb, who was near him, terrified, ran into the next room where his companions were watching.

Top, at that moment, barked in a strange manner.

All rushed in immediately and managed to restrain the dying boy, who was endeavouring to throw himself out of his bed, while Spilett, taking his arm, felt his pulse gradually quicken.

It was five in the morning. The rays of the rising sun began to shine in at the windows of Granite House. It promised to be a fine day, and this day was to be poor Herbert's last!

A ray glanced on the table placed near the bed.

Suddenly Pencroft, uttering a cry, pointed to the table.

On it lay a little oblong box, of which the cover bore these words: — “SULPHATE OF QUININE.”

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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THE WANDERER'S NECKLACE by H Rider Haggard

Book III: Egypt

Chapter IV: The Caliph Harun

Here there is an absolute blank in my story. One of those walls of oblivion of which I have spoken seems to be built across its path. It is as though a stream had plunged suddenly from some bright valley into the bosom of a mountain side and there vanished from the ken of man. What happened in the tomb after Heliodore had ended her tale; whether we departed thence together or left her there a while; how we escaped from Kurna, and by what good fortune or artifice we came safely to Alexandria, I know not. As to all these matters my vision fails me utterly. So far as I am concerned, they are buried beneath the dust of time. I know as little of them as I know of where and how I slept between my life as Olaf and this present life of mine; that is, nothing at all. Yet in this way or in that the stream did win through the mountain, since beyond all grows clear again.

Once more I stood upon the deck of the *Diana* in the harbour of Alexandria. With me were Martina and Heliodore. Heliodore's face was stained and she was dressed as a boy, such a harlequin lad as singers and mountebanks often take in their company. The ship was ready to start and the wind served. Yet we could not sail because of the lack of some permission. A Moslem galley patrolled the harbour and threatened to sink us if we dared to weigh without this paper. The mate had gone ashore with a bribe. We waited and waited. At length the captain, Menas, who stood by me, whispered into my ear,

"Be calm; he comes; all is well."

Then I heard the mate shout: "I have the writing under seal," and Menas gave the order to cast off the ropes that held the ship to the quay. One of the sailors came up and reported to Menas that their companion, Cosmas, was missing. It seemed that he had slipped ashore without leave and had not returned.

"There let him bide," said Menas, with an oath. "Doubtless the hog lies drunk in some den. When he awakes he may tell what tale he pleases and find his own way back to Lesbos. Cast off, cast off! I say."

At this moment that same Cosmas appeared. I could not see him, but I could hear him plainly enough. Evidently he had become involved in some brawl, for an angry woman and others were demanding money of him and he was shouting back drunken threats. A man struck him and the woman got him by the beard. Then his reason left him altogether.

"Am I, a Christian, to be treated thus by you heathen dogs?" he screamed. "Oh, you think I am dirt beneath your feet. I have friends, I tell you I have friends. You know not whom I serve. I say that I am a soldier of Olaf the Northman, Olaf the Blind, Olaf Red-Sword, he who made you prophet-worshippers sing so small at Mitylene, as he will do again ere long."

"Indeed, friend," said a quiet voice. It was that of the Moslem captain, Yusuf, he who befriended us when we arrived at Alexandria, who had been watching all this scene. "Then you serve a great general, as some of us have cause to know. Tell me, where is he now, for I hear that he has left Lesbos?"

“Where is he? Why, aboard yonder ship, of course. Oh! he has fooled you finely. Another time you’ll search beggar’s rags more closely.”

“Cast off! Cast off!” roared Menas.

“Nay,” said the officer, “cast not off. Soldiers, drive away those men. I must have words with the captain of this ship. Come, bring that drunken fellow with you.”

“Now all is finished,” I said.

“Yes,” answered Heliodore, “all is finished. After we have endured so much it is hard. Well, at least death remains to us.”

“Hold your hand,” exclaimed Martina. “God still lives and can save us yet.”

Black bitterness took hold of me. In some few days I had hoped to reach Lesbos, and there be wed to Heliodore. And now! And now!

“Cut the ropes, Menas,” I cried, “and out with the oars. We’ll risk the galley. You, Martina, set me at the mouth of the gangway and tell me when to strike. Though I be blind I may yet hold them back till we clear the quay.”

She obeyed, and I drew the red sword from beneath my rags. Then, amidst the confusion which followed, I heard the grave voice of Yusuf speaking to me.

“Sir,” he said, “for your own sake I pray you put up that sword, which we think is one whereof tales have been told. To fight is useless, for I have bowmen who can shoot you down and spears that can outreach you. General Olaf, a brave man should know when to surrender, especially if he be blind.”

“Aye, sir,” I answered, “and a brave man should know when to die.”

“Why should you die, General?” went on the voice. “I do not know that for a Christian to visit Egypt disguised as a beggar will be held a crime worthy of death, unless indeed you came hither to spy out the land.”

“Can the blind spy?” asked Martina indignantly.

“Who can say, Lady? But certainly it seems that your eyes are bright and quick enough. Also there is another matter. A while ago, when this ship came to Alexandria, I signed a paper giving leave to a certain eyeless musician and his niece to ply their trade in Egypt. Then there were two of you; now I behold a third. Who is that comely lad with a stained face that stands beside you?”

Heliodore began some story, saying that she was the orphan son of I forget whom, and while she told it certain of the Moslems slipped past me.

“Truly you should do well in the singing trade,” interrupted the officer with a laugh, “seeing that for a boy your voice is wondrous sweet. Are you quite sure that you remember your sex

aright? Well, it can easily be proved. Bare that lad's bosom, soldiers. Nay, 'tis needless; snatch off that head-dress."

A man obeyed, and Heliodore's beautiful black hair, which I would not suffer her to cut, fell tumbling to her knees.

"Let me be," she said. "I admit that I am a woman."

"That is generous of you, Lady," the officer answered in the midst of the laughter which followed. "Now will you add to your goodness by telling me your name? You refuse? Then shall I help you? In the late Coptic war it was my happy fortune twice to see a certain noble maiden, the daughter of Magas the Prince, whom the Emir Musa afterwards took for himself, but who fled from him. Tell me, Lady, have you a twin sister?"

"Cease your mockings, sir," said Heliodore despairingly. "I am she you seek."

"'Tis Musa seeks you, not I, Lady."

"Then, sir, he seeks in vain, for know that ere he finds I die. Oh! sir, I know you have a noble heart; be pitiful and let us go. I'll tell you all the truth. Olaf Red-Sword yonder and I have long been affianced. Blind though he is, he sought me through great dangers, aye, and found me. Would you part us at the last? In the name of the God we both worship, and of your mother, I pray you let us go."

"By the Prophet, that I would do, Lady, only then I fear me that I should let my head go from its shoulders also. There are too many in this secret for it to bide there long if I did as you desire. Nay, you must to the Emir, all three of you—not Musa, but to his rival, Obaidallah, who loves him little, and by the decree of the Caliph once again rules Egypt. Be sure that in a matter between you and Musa you will meet with justice from Obaidallah. Come now, fearing nothing, to where we may find you all garments more befitting to your station than those mummer's robes."

So a guard was formed round us, and we went. As my feet touched the quay I heard a sound of angry voices, followed by groans and a splash in the water.

"What is that?" I asked of Yusuf.

"I think, General, that your servants from the Diana have settled some account that they had with the drunken dog who was so good as to bark out your name to me. But, with your leave, I will not look to make sure."

"God pardon him! As yet I cannot," I muttered, and marched on.

We stood, whether on that day or another I do not know, in some hall of judgment. Martina whispered to me that a small, dark man was seated in the chair of state, and about him priests and others. This was the Emir Obaidallah. Musa, that had been Emir, who, she said, was fat and sullen, was there also, and whenever his glance fell upon Heliodore I felt her shiver at my side. So was the Patriarch Politian who pleaded our cause. The case was long, so long that, being courteous as ever, they gave us cushions to sit on, also, in an interval, food and sherbet.

Musa claimed Heliodore as his slave. An officer who prosecuted claimed that Allah having given me, their enemy and a well-known general who had done them much damage, into their hands, I should be put to death. Politian answered on behalf of all of us, saying that we had harmed no man. He added that as there was a truce between the Christians and the Moslems, I could not be made to suffer the penalties of war in a time of peace, who had come to Egypt but to seek a maid to whom I was affianced. Moreover, that even if it were so, the murder of prisoners was not one of those penalties.

The Emir listened to all but said little. At length, however, he asked whether we were willing to become Moslems, since if so he thought that we might go free. We answered that we were not willing.

“Then it would seem,” he said, “that the lady Heliodore, having been taken in war, must be treated as a prisoner of war, the only question being to whom she belongs.”

Now Musa interrupted angrily, shouting out that as to this there was no doubt, since she belonged to him, who had captured her during his tenure of office.

The Emir thought a while, and we waited trembling. At last he gave judgment, saying:

“The General Olaf the Blind, who in Byzantium was known as Olaf Red-Sword or as Michael, and who while in the service of the Empress Irene often made war against the followers of the Prophet, but who afterwards lost his eyes at the hands of this same evil woman, is a man of whom all the world has heard. Particularly have we Moslems heard of him, seeing that as governor of Lesbos in recent days he inflicted a great defeat upon our navy, slaying many thousands and taking others prisoner. But as it chances God, Who bides His time to work justice, set a bait for him in the shape of a fair woman. On this bait he has been hooked, notwithstanding all his skill and cunning, and delivered into our hands, having come into Egypt disguised as a beggar in order to seek out that woman. Still, as he is so famous a man, and as at present there is a truce between us and the Empire of the East, which truce raises certain doubtful points of high policy, I decree that his case be remitted to the Caliph Harun-al-Rashid, my master, and that he be conveyed to Baghdad there to await judgment. With him will go the woman whom he alleges to be his niece, but who, as we are informed, was one of the waiting-ladies of the Empress Irene. Against her there is nothing to be said save that she may be a Byzantine spy.

“Now I come to the matter of the lady Heliodore, who is reported to be the wife or the lover or the affianced of this General Olaf, a question of which God alone knows the truth. This lady Heliodore is a person of high descent and ancient race. She is the only child of the late Prince Magas, who claimed to have the blood of the old Pharaohs in his veins, and who within this year was defeated and slain by my predecessor in office, the Emir Musa. The said Emir, having captured the lady Heliodore, purposed to place her in his harem, as he had a right to do, seeing that she refused the blessings of the Faith. As it chanced, however, she escaped from him, as it is told by stabbing the eunuch in charge of her. At least it is certain that this eunuch was found dead, though by whom he was killed is not certain. Now that she has been taken again, the lord Musa claims the woman as his spoil and demands that I should hand her over to him. Yet it seems to me that if she is the spoil of anyone, she belongs to the Emir governing Egypt at the date of her recapture. It was only by virtue of his office as Emir, and not by gift, purchase, or marriage contract, that the lord Musa came into possession of her, which possession was voided by her flight before she was added to his household and he

acquired any natural rights over her in accordance with our law. Now for my part, I, as Emir, make no claim to this woman, holding it a hateful thing before God to force one into my household who has no wish to dwell there, especially when I know her to be married or affianced to another man. Still, as here also are involved high questions of law, I command that the lady Heliodore, daughter of the late Prince Magas, shall also be conveyed with all courtesy and honour to the Caliph Harun at Baghdad, there to abide his judgment of her case. The matter is finished. Let the officers concerned carry out my decree and answer for the safety of these prisoners with their lives.”

“The matter is not finished,” shouted the ex-Emir Musa. “You, Obaidallah, have uttered this false judgment because your heart is black towards me whom you have displaced.”

“Then appeal against it,” said Obaidallah, “but know that if you attempt to lay hands upon this lady, my orders are that you be cut down as an enemy to the law. Patriarch of the Christians, you sail for Baghdad to visit the Caliph at his request in a ship that he has sent for you. Into your hands I give these prisoners under guard, knowing that you will deal well with them, who are of your false faith. To you also who have the Caliph’s ear, Allah knows why, I will entrust letters making true report of all this matter. Let proper provision be made for the comfort of the General Olaf and of those with him. Musa, may your greetings at the Court of Baghdad be such as you deserve; meanwhile cease to trouble me.”

At the door of that hall I was separated from Heliodore and Martina and led to some house or prison, where I was given a large room with servants to wait upon me. Here I slept that night, and on the morrow asked when we sailed for Beirut on our way to Baghdad. The chief of the servants answered that he did not know. During that day I was visited by Yusuf, the officer who had captured us on board the Diana. He also told me that he did not know when we sailed, but certainly it would not be for some days. Further, he said that I need have no fear for the lady Heliodore and Martina, as they were well treated in some other place. Then he led me into a great garden, where he said I was at liberty to walk whenever I pleased.

Thus began perhaps the most dreadful time of waiting and suspense in all this life of mine, seeing that it was the longest. Every few days the officer Yusuf would visit me and talk of many matters, for we became friends. Only of Heliodore and Martina he could or would tell me nothing, nor of when we were to set out on our journey to Baghdad. I asked to be allowed to speak with the Patriarch Politian, but he answered that this was impossible, as he had been called away from Alexandria for a little while. Nor could I have audience with the Emir Obaidallah, for he too had been called away.

Now my heart was filled with terrors, for I feared lest in this way or in that Heliodore had fallen into the hands of the accursed Musa. I prayed Yusuf to tell me the truth of the matter, whereon he swore by the Prophet that she was safe, but would say no more. Nor did this comfort me much, since for aught I knew he might mean she was safe in death. I was aware, further, that the Moslems held it no crime to deceive an infidel. Week was added to week, and still I languished in this rich prison. The best of garments and food were brought to me; I was even given wine. Kind hands tended me and led me from place to place. I lacked nothing except freedom and the truth. Doubt and fear preyed upon my heart till at length I fell ill and scarcely cared to walk in the garden. One day when Yusuf visited me I told him that he would not need to come many more times, since I felt that I was going to die.

“Do not die,” he answered, “since then perchance you will find you have done so in vain,” and he left me.

On the following evening he returned and told me that he had brought a physician to see me, a certain Mahommed, who was standing before me. Although I had no hope from any physician, I prayed this Mahommed to be seated, whereon Yusuf left us, closing the door behind him.

“Be pleased to set out your case, General Olaf,” said Mahommed in a grave, quiet voice, “for know that I am sent by the Caliph himself to minister to you.”

“How can that be, seeing that he is in Baghdad?” I answered. Still, I told him my ailments.

When I had finished he said:

“I perceive that you suffer more from your mind than from your body. Be so good, now, as to repeat to me the tale of your life, of which I have already heard something. Tell me especially of those parts of it which have to do with the lady Heliodore, daughter of Magas, of your blinding by Irene for her sake, and of your discovery of her in Egypt, where you sought her disguised as a beggar.”

“Why should I tell you all my story, sir?”

“That I may know how to heal you of your sickness. Also, General Olaf, I will be frank with you. I am more than a mere physician; I have certain powers under the Caliph’s seal, and it will be wise on your part to open all your heart to me.”

Now I reflected that there could be little harm in repeating to this strange doctor what so many already knew. So I told him everything, and the tale was long.

“Wondrous! Most wondrous!” said the grave-voiced physician when I had finished. “Yet to me the strangest part of your history is that played therein by the lady Martina. Had she been your lover, now, one might have understood—perhaps,” and he paused.

“Sir Physician,” I answered, “the lady Martina has been and is no more than my friend.”

“Ah! Now I see new virtues in your religion, since we Moslems do not find such friends among those women who are neither our mothers nor our sisters. Evidently the Christian faith must have power to change the nature of women, which I thought to be impossible. Well, General Olaf, I will consider of your case, and I may tell you that I have good hopes of finding a medicine by which it can be cured, all save your sight, which in this world God Himself cannot give back to you. Now I have a favour to ask. I see that in this room of yours there is a curtain hiding the bed of the servant who sleeps with you. I desire to see another patient here, and that this patient should not see you. Of your goodness will you sit upon the bed behind that curtain, and will you swear to me on your honour as a soldier that whatever you may hear you will in no way reveal yourself?”

“Surely, that is if it is nothing which will bring disgrace upon my head or name.”

“It will be nothing to bring disgrace on your head or name, General Olaf, though perhaps it may bring some sorrow to your heart. As yet I cannot say.”

“My heart is too full of sorrow to hold more,” I answered.

Then he led me down to the guard’s bed, on which I sat myself down, being strangely interested in this play. He drew the curtain in front of me, and I heard him return to the centre of the room and clap his hands. Someone entered, saying,

“High Lord, your will?”

“Silence!” he exclaimed, and began to whisper orders, while I wondered what kind of a physician this might be who was addressed as “High Lord.”

The servant went, and, after a while of waiting that seemed long, once more the door was opened, and I heard the sweep of a woman’s dress upon the carpet.

“Be seated, Lady,” said the grave voice of the physician, “for I have words to say to you.”

“Sir, I obey,” answered another voice, at the sound of which my heart stood still. It was that of Heliodore.

“Lady,” went on the physician, “as my robe will tell you, I am a doctor of medicine. Also, as it chances, I am something more, namely, an envoy appointed by the Caliph Harun-al-Rashid, having full powers to deal with your case. Here are my credentials if you care to read them,” and I heard a crackling as of parchment being unfolded.

“Sir,” answered Heliodore, “I will read the letters later. For the present I accept your word. Only I would ask one question, if it pleases you to answer. Why have not I and the General Olaf been conveyed to the presence of the Caliph himself, as was commanded by the Emir Obaidallah?”

“Lady, because it was not convenient to the Caliph to receive you, since as it chanced at present he is moving from place to place upon the business of the State. Therefore, as you will find in the writing, he has appointed me to deal with your matter. Now, Lady, the Caliph and I his servant know all your story from lips which even you would trust. You are betrothed to a certain enemy of his, a Northman named Olaf Red-Sword or Michael, who was blinded by the Empress Irene for some offence against her, but was afterwards appointed by her son Constantine to be governor of the Isle of Lesbos. This Olaf, by the will of God, inflicted a heavy defeat upon the forces of the Caliph which he had sent to take Lesbos. Then, by the goodness of God, he wandered to Egypt in search of you, with the result that both of you were taken prisoner. Lady, it will be clear to you that, having this wild hawk Olaf in his hands, the Caliph would scarcely let him go again to prey upon the Moslems, though whether he will kill him or make of him a slave as yet I do not know. Nay, hear me out before you speak. The Caliph has been told of your wondrous beauty, and as I see even less than the truth. Also he has heard of the high spirit which you showed in the Coptic rising, when your father, the Prince Magas, was slain, and of how you escaped out of the hand of the Emir Musa the Fat, and were not afraid to dwell for months alone in the tombs of the ancient dead. Now the Caliph, being moved in his heart by your sad plight and all that he has heard concerning you, commands me to make you an offer.

“The offer is that you should come to his Court, and there be instructed for a while by his learned men in the truths of religion. Then, if it pleases you to adopt Islam, he will take you as one of his wives, and if it does not please you, will add you to his harem, since it is not lawful for him to marry a woman who remains a Christian. In either case he will make on you a settlement of property to the value of that which belonged to your father, the Prince Magas. Reflect well before you answer. Your choice lies between the memory of a blind man, whom I think you will never see again, and the high place of one of the wives of the greatest sovereign of the earth.”

“Sir, before I answer I would put a question to you. Why do you say ‘the memory of a blind man’?”

“Because, Lady, a rumour has reached me which I desired to hold back from you, but which now you force me to repeat. It is that this General Olaf has in truth already passed the gate of death.”

“Then, sir,” she answered, with a little sob, “it behoves me to follow him through that gate.”

“That will happen when it pleases God. Meanwhile, what is your answer?”

“Sir, my answer is that I, a poor Christian prisoner, a victim of war and fate, thank the Caliph Harun-al-Rashid for the honours and the benefits he would shower on me, and with humility decline them.”

“So be it, Lady. The Caliph is not a man who would wish to force your inclination. Still, this being so, I am charged to say he bids you remember that you were taken prisoner in war by the Emir Musa. He holds that, subject to his own prior right, which he waives, you are the property of the Emir Musa under a just interpretation of the law. Yet he would be merciful as God is merciful, and therefore he gives you the choice of three things. The first of these is that you adopt Islam with a faithful heart and go free.”

“That I refuse, as I have refused it before,” said Heliodore.

“The second is,” he continued, “that you enter the harem of the Emir Musa.”

“That I refuse also.”

“And the third and last is that, having thrust aside his mercy, you suffer the common fate of a captured Christian who persists in error, and die.”

“That I accept,” said Heliodore.

“You accept death. In the splendour of your youth and beauty, you accept death,” he said, with a note of wonder in his voice. “Truly, you are great-hearted, and the Caliph will grieve when he learns his loss, as I do now. Yet I have my orders, for which my head must answer. Lady, if you die, it must be here and now. Do you still choose death?”

“Yes,” she said in a low voice.

“Behold this cup,” he went on, “and this draught which I pour into it,” and I heard the sound of liquid flowing. “Presently I shall ask you to drink of it, and then, after a little while, say the half of an hour, you will fall asleep, to wake in whatever world God has appointed to the idol worshippers of the Cross. You will suffer no pain and no fear; indeed, maybe the draught will bring you joy.”

“Then give it me,” said Heliodore faintly. “I will drink at once and have done.”

Then it was that I came out from behind my curtain and groped my way towards them.

“Sir Physician, or Sir Envoy of the Caliph Harun,” I said; but for the moment went no further, since, with a low cry, Heliodore cast herself upon my breast and stopped my lips with hers.

“Hush till I have spoken,” I whispered, placing my arm about her; then continued. “I swore to you just now that I would not reveal myself unless I heard aught which would bring disgrace on my head or name. To stand still behind yonder curtain while my betrothed is poisoned at your hands would bring disgrace upon my head and name so black that not all the seas of all the world could wash it away. Say, Physician, does yonder cup hold enough of death for both of us?”

“Yes, General Olaf, and if you choose to share it I think the Caliph will be glad, since he loves not the killing of brave men. Only it must be now and without more words. You can talk for a little afterwards before the sleep takes you.”

“So be it,” I said. “Since I must die, as I heard you decree but now, it is no crime to die thus, or at least I’ll risk it who have one to guard upon that road. Drink, beloved, a little less than half since I am the stronger. Then give me the cup.”

“Husband, I pledge you,” she said, and drank, thrusting the cup into my hand.

I, too, lifted it to my lips. Lo! it was empty.

“Oh! most cruel of thieves,” I cried, “you have stolen all.”

“Aye,” she answered. “Shall I see you swallow poison before my eyes? I die, but perchance God may save you yet.”

“Not so, Heliodore,” I cried again, and, turning, began to grope my way to the window-place, which I knew was far from the ground, since I had no weapon that would serve my turn.

In an instant, as I thrust the lattice open, I felt two strong arms cast about me and heard the physician exclaim,

“Come, Lady, help me with this madman, lest he do himself a mischief.”

She seized me also, and we struggled together all three of us. The doors burst open, and I was dragged back into the centre of the room.

“Olaf Red-Sword, the blind General of the Christians,” said the physician in a new voice, one that was full of majesty and command, “I who speak to you am no doctor of medicine and no envoy. I am Harun-al-Rashid, Caliph of the Faithful. Is it not so, my servants?”

“It is so, Caliph,” pealed the answer from many throats.

“Hearken, then, to the decree of Harun-al-Rashid. Learn both of you that all which has passed between us was but a play that I have played to test the love and faithfulness of you twain. Lady Heliodore, be at ease. You have drunk nothing save water distilled with roses, and no sleep shall fall on you save that which Nature brings to happiness. Lady, I tell you that, having seen what I have seen and heard what I have heard, rather would I stand in the place of that blind man to-night than be Sovereign of the East. Truly, I knew not that love such as yours was to be met with in the world. I say that when I saw you drain the cup in a last poor struggle to drive back the death that threatened this Olaf my own heart went out in love for you. Yet have no fear, since my love is of a kind that would not rob you of your love, but rather would bring it to a rich and glorious blossom in the sunshine of my favour. Wondrous is the tale of the wooing of you twain and happy shall be its end. General Olaf, you conquered me in war and dealt with those of my servants who fell into your hands according to the nobleness of your heart. Shall I, then, be outdone in generosity by one whom a while ago I should have named a Christian dog? Not so! Let the high priest of the Christians, Politian, be brought hither. He stands without, and with him the lady named Martina, who was the Empress Irene’s waiting-woman.”

The messengers went and there followed a silence. There are times when the heart is too full for words; at least, Heliodore and I found nothing to say to each other. We only clasped each other’s hand and waited.

At length the door opened, and I heard the eager, bustling step of Politian, also another gliding step, which I knew for that of Martina. She came to me, she kissed me on the brow, and whispered into my ear,

“So all is well at last, as I knew it would be; and now, Olaf—and now, Olaf, you are about to be married. Yes, at once, and—I wish you joy.”

Her words were simple enough, yet they kindled in my heart a light by which it saw many things.

“Martina,” I said, “if I have lived to reach this hour, under God it is through you. Martina, they say that each of us has a guardian angel in heaven, and if that be so, mine has come to earth. Yet in heaven alone shall I learn to thank her as I ought.”

Then suddenly Martina was sobbing on my breast; after which I remember only that Heliodore helped me to wipe away her tears, while in the background I heard the Caliph say to himself in his deep voice,

“Wondrous! Wondrous! By Allah! these Christians are a strange folk. How far wiser is our law, for then he could have married both of them, and all three would have been happy. Truly he who decreed that it should be so knew the heart of man and woman and was a prophet sent by God. Nay, answer me not, friend Politian, since on matters of religion we have agreed that we will never argue. Do your office according to your unholy rites, and I and my servants

will watch, praying that the Evil One may be absent from the service. Oh! silence, silence! Have I not said that we will not argue on subjects of religion? To your business, man.”

So Politian drew us together to the other end of the chamber, and there wed us as best he might, with Martina for witness and the solemn Moslems for congregation.

When it was over, Harun commanded my wife to lead me before him.

“Here is a marriage gift for you, General Olaf,” he said; “one, I think, that you will value more than any other,” and he handed me something sharp and heavy.

I felt it, hilt and blade, and knew it for the Wanderer’s sword, yes, my own red sword from which I took my name, that the Commander of the Faithful now restored to me, and with it my place and freedom. I took it, and, saying no word, with that same sword gave to him the triple salute due to a sovereign.

Instantly I heard Harun’s scimitar, the scimitar that was famous throughout the East, rattle as it left its scabbard, as did the scimitars of all those who attended on him, and knew that there was being returned to me the salute which a sovereign gives to a general in high command. Then the Caliph spoke again.

“A wedding gift to you, Lady Heliodore, child of an ancient and mighty race, and new-made wife of a gallant man. For the second time to-night take this cup of gold, but let that which lies within it adorn your breast in memory of Harun. Queens of old have worn those jewels, but never have they hung above a nobler heart.”

Heliodore took the cup, and in her trembling hand I heard the priceless gems that filled it clink against its sides. Once more the Caliph spoke.

“A gift for you also, Lady Martina. Take this ring from my hand and place it on your own. It seems a small thing, does it not? Yet something lies within its circle. In this city I saw to-day a very beauteous house built by one of your Grecian folk, and behind it lands that a swift horse could scarcely circle twice within an hour, most fruitful lands fed by the waters. That house and those lands are yours, together with rule over all who dwell upon them. There you may live content with whomever you may please, even if he be a Christian, free of tax or tribute, provided only that neither you nor he shall plot against my power. Now, to all three of you farewell, perchance for ever, unless some of us should meet again in war. General Olaf, your ship lies in the harbour; use it when you will. I pray that you will think kindly of Harun-al-Rashid, as he does of you, Olaf Red-Sword. Come, let us leave these two. Lady Martina, I pray you to be my guest this night.”

So they all went, leaving Heliodore and myself alone in the great room, yes, alone at last and safe.

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SUBMISSIONS CALL SUBMISSIONS CALL SUBMISSIONS CALL
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Lovecraftiana—the Magazine of Eldritch Horror

Lovecraftiana is a quarterly publication from Rogue Planet Press, with issues coming out April 30th, July 31st, October 31st, and January 31st, featuring stories, articles, poetry or artwork on Cthulhu Mythos / Lovecraftian themes.

Submissions can be sent to editor@schlock.co.uk

the current edition is available from www.lulu.com

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Please submit your manuscript as a .rtf, .doc or .docx file (all other formats will automatically be rejected. Contact me prior to submitting if this presents an issue for you.)

Font and formatting: Please submit in Times New Roman, 12-point font; single line spacing. Please format the document to 1st line indentation of 1". The page margin should be set to 1" on all sides.

No headers, footers, or page numbers.

Please check grammar.

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