

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

# **Schlock!**

**WEBZINE**

VOL. 14, ISSUE 11  
17TH FEBRUARY 2019

**THE CURIOUS CASE  
OF THE BOOKSHOP  
IN BRIGHTON**

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**JUNKIE  
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**THE TWEEDLES  
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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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## 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!

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

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

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SCIENCE FICTION CLASSIC

## EDITORIAL

This week a trip to a bookshop results in unexpected perils for Harry Fielding. A serial killer is the perfect candidate for experimentation. And a computer game addict encounters the ultimate end of level boss.

Gregory Owen's *Fish Story* concludes. A couple of rednecks net themselves a bug eyed monster. New worlds open up for Dimara aboard Carter Ward's ship. Swanhild deals with Gudruda. And in *The Moon Pool*, the Shining One is shaped.

—Gavin Chappell

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

**IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!**

By Vincent Davis



**"MY FEET DETECT A BRINY, ACERBIC, ALMOST FRUITY TASTE. A LITTLE GAMY, KIND OF PUNGENT, A LITTLE TART, WITH A SOMEWHAT TANGY FINISH. IN SHORT, A PARTY IN YOUR MOUTH KIND OF GARBAGE."**

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

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

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

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

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## THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE BOOKSHOP IN BRIGHTON by Francis Marie de Châtillon

### Part 1

Harry Fielding was a happy man. His messy divorce now finalised, he could get on with the rest of his life, which, he reasoned, at 45, left him quite a few years ahead. He'd got out of London and away from the secondary school where he taught, and move to Brighton at the beginning of the month. Harry was still exploring Brighton and Hove (hated the Royal Pavilion) and the various watering holes for which it is famous (loved the Great Eastern). Harry had managed to come out of his divorce with enough money in the bank to buy a small, Victorian terraced house in Cuthbert Road, in the Queen's Park area, up near the hospital. He loved it. There was a corner shop almost across the road and a pub at the end, which, happily for him, wasn't noisy at chuck out time on Fridays and Saturdays. He planned to do a bit of redecorating just to put his mark on it, so to speak. With this in mind, Harry was out and about this Saturday morning looking to buy a few inexpensive things to dot about.

The sun shone brightly this late April morning as Harry strolled into the Lanes, that narrow, winding system of passages that used to be the centre of the old fishing town of Brighthelmstone, to explore some of the quaint there. He stopped at a pawnbroker's to examine some second hand signet rings; something he wanted to get for his right hand now he'd taken off his wedding ring of near twenty years. He browsed in two or three bookshops; he had taken a keen interest in reading now, rather than spend the evening sprawled in front of the television. He had a coffee in a small café before moving on to the antique shops and 'curiosity' shops that abound.

Turning into one lane he found what looked to be a strange shop. The front windows were a yellow colour, as if they had that old cellophane over them from years ago to stop things from fading in the window. They were also well below eye level, which indicated to Harry that it was a basement, yet it had no upper parts. It looked queerly old, with an odd entrance that made him go up four or five steps only to descend again when inside.

The interior of the shop was no less curious than the outside: it was a veritable Aladdin's cave of old leather bound volumes, antique mirrors, paintings and whatnot else. Everything was dusty. The light was noticeably dim and the recesses of the room quite dark. Chaos seemed to be the order of the day. To his surprise there appeared to be nobody attending the shop: he called out to announce himself but no one answered or came to attend him. Harry felt a little uncomfortable looking around seemingly alone, but he shifted about in the gloom finding old silver teapots piled up in one corner, along with some goblets of all sorts of shapes and sizes. Then, he moved on to some very old Venetian mirrors. At these he contemplated whether one of the larger ones would suit in the living room; but then dismissed it, as seeing himself too often would make him feel a glutton for punishment.

Looking farther around he saw vast piles of what looked like mixed art work: canvases of all sizes with and without frames, prints, and drawings likewise stacked against a wall. Now, these interested Harry as he was looking for some things to hang on the walls, and so he set to amongst them. He went through dozens but, strangely, nothing caught his eye. Harry was just about to turn away and give up, when the corner of a small panel painting, about 10x8ins, caught his eye. He pulled it out from under a couple of prints and studied it closely. It was a small portrait of a

stately looking elderly man in what seemed Renaissance clothing. He was obviously wealthy and although almost square to the picture plane, appeared to be eyeing someone over to his left, engaging their attention. Harry liked it and he put it aside. He then noticed there was another small picture again mostly hidden in amongst other material, and so he tugged that out also. He smiled broadly. It was another fine looking panel portrait, about the same size as the other; only this was of a younger man in his mid-fifties. He too looked authoritative and commanding in his aspect and attire; Harry put the portrait down with the other.

Suddenly, a man appeared from out of nowhere from behind something. Startled, Harry jumped; the man had, seemingly, materialised instantly in the manner of Jeeves in one of Wodehouse's books. Seeing Harry jump he sort of bounced backwards.

"Oh! I'm so sorry to have come on you so suddenly. Please forgive me!" the man apologised.

Harry smiled back weakly. He was looking into the visage of a small, almost wizened man, whose face was crazed with lines. In contrast to his frame, his face was plump, possessed of two very prominent buccal fat pads, which accentuated his deep nasolabial creases. Harry thought this chap seemed to be eyeing him pretty much as a man might a juicy steak after a fast.

"Are you the owner?" Harry asked at last, pushing aside his thoughts.

"Oh yes. Indeed, dear sir!" he fired back with pronounced enthusiasm. He held his hand out in greeting. Harry took it and to his surprise received a firm and vigorous handshake.

"Well, can I ask you about these two portraits here?" Harry said, holding them up. "Do you know who the artist might be, by any chance?"

"Ahhhhh, now," the elderly gentleman let out. "These are two very fine pieces, of course. Who the artist is or the sitters, however, I'm afraid I don't know. I bought them at auction and the auction house was also at a loss to identify them." At this, he beamed in a wistful sort of way. Harry thought him a very strange old bird.

"What price is on them, Mr..." His voice trailed off, yet the old man did not supply a name, but just eyed him with his head tilted to one side. "Because I'm interested in buying them for my house. I've just moved here you see." Why Harry supplied the last intelligence, he had no idea.

"Oh, my dear man, congratulations! Con-grat-u-lations!" he expostulated grandly. Harry found this almost comic and wondered if the man's bow tie would suddenly start spinning like an air screw on a Spitfire; then, as if pulled by one, the old man shot forward and slapped Harry smartly on the back a couple of times.

"Er, thanks," Harry said, surprised. He looked and felt like a recently confounded Pharisee.

"Now, price! Yeeees, price." The old man looked thoughtful for a moment and then cried out theatrically, "Let's say £5 each! Yes, I say, £5 the two!"

Harry thought, “This guy’s nuts”.

Despite the bargain being well in his favour, Harry began to explain he couldn’t possibly pay so little, but the eccentric old gentleman wouldn’t hear of it; he was practically pressing Harry to take them.

“Think of it as a small welcoming gift to our town, young man!”

Again, Harry thought, “Yep, this guy’s seriously nuts!”

Harry paid the £5, again protesting the smallness of the sum, and in return, as if prepared beforehand, the strange old man produced a receipt of almost A4 size written in what looked like copperplate. The man thanked Harry profusely, pumped his hand vigorously and all but danced for joy about the shop. Harry didn’t pretend to understand this queer old man and his eccentric manner—he was just glad he’d got the pictures. Harry left the shop a contented man. On the way home, he made a small detour to Trafalgar Street to sink a pint in the Eastern, and then another near his house at the Cuthbert. As he downed the second he thought, “That old man seemed pretty pleased to be rid of those paintings—hope they’re not stolen goods!”

At home, he thought about in which room the paintings would look their best, and decided on his bedroom on the wall at the foot of his bed. There, he reasoned, he could sit up and look at them as he read his books before sleeping.

Harry measured out the height and distance apart for the two paintings and knocked a couple of masonry nails into the wall. He placed the portraits so it appeared the elderly man looking to his left was engaging the other slightly younger man. Harry felt most pleased with this small creative touch. That night he again popped out to the pub and then ordered an Indian takeaway. He watched about thirty minutes of some banal television programme before he felt like shooting himself, then decided that his bed called.

He wearily climbed the stairs and, after a quick trip to the bathroom, slipped on his PJs and got under the quilt. He sat pondering the two pictures before him. Who were they? What lives had they had? Were they even real people, or did they only exist in the imagination of the artist? The last, he hoped was not the case; he much preferred a real backstory to his new purchases. Harry was reading *The Thirty Nine Steps* at the moment—he was about halfway through—and he loved it! Reading was far better than the TV. Soon, his eyes began to close, the Steps slid from his hand and Harry slept.

Part 2.

There was a noise: a loud one. It had come from somewhere in the street. Sitting up smartly, he listened then checked his watch. It was nearly 3am, so it couldn’t have been some pisshead from the pub. He wondered about an intruder somewhere; then dismissed the thought—intruders tend to be very quiet. After a few minutes listening, the street being again silent, he turned over and tried to sleep, cursing whatever it was that had woken him.

As he lay, he thought he could hear very faint whisperings; straining his ears hard he wondered what it could be. He could swear there was something, but it was just out of reach. What on earth was it? Maybe it was just a figment of his imagination brought on by the startling noise. He tried to sleep but quite in vain, as the ever so slight whisperings continued. “This is quite maddening!” he said aloud, and throwing his legs out the bed he jumped up.

In the kitchen he made some tea, hoping it would relax him and aid his return to sleep. Harry noticed immediately that down here the strange whispering had stopped. He went into the living room, which was at the front of the house, like his bedroom, and listened. There was nothing. He opened the front door and peered out; only an empty street greeted him.

He drank his tea and went upstairs and tried to settle. He turned off the bed side light but not even a minute passed before the whispering started again. This time they were more audible; but he couldn't make out what was being said—but said something was—he was certain.

“Sod this nonsense!” Harry cried. He sprang up again, and grabbing the golf club he wisely or unwisely kept by the bed (his ex-wife had serious mixed feeling about this habit as a security measure), he flew down the stairs determined to confront whoever the bastards were that interfered with his rest.

He flung the front door open and strode out into the garden and looked around. Checking the street and around the house he found nothing. Harry decided they were hiding. Whacking the club on the path Harry shouted, “OKAY you fuckers. Come out. Now!” But no one materialised from anywhere. He waited then shouted again whacking the club a second time. Yet still nothing.

“Well, whoever you are you'd better piss off quick, or I'll call the police to you. See if I fucking don't, you arseholes!” Frustrated, he went inside. He wondered if he'd woken the neighbours.

For the second time Harry climbed the stairs to try and sleep. He was frustrated. “It's enough to make a monk wank,” he said to himself. As he entered the bedroom again he thought he heard something; but this time he just thought “Fuck it,” and jumped under the quilt. This time Harry was soon asleep.

He was in the throes of a terrible dream. Harry was revolving about in the bed like a top, his pyjamas damp with perspiration. Rain was pouring down somewhere and a frightful wind was howling around the house; just above the noise Harry could hear arguing and shouting. He woke with a terrible start, gasping for breath. To his amazement the weather had changed dramatically from earlier and the storm of his dream was real. He must have somehow imported it into his sleep he realised, and he shivered despite being hot. Harry padded to the bathroom opposite his bedroom, and shaking off his PJs he turned on the water to freshen himself. Harry was just soaping himself over in the shower when, through the hiss of water, he heard it: a low anguished moan, slow as pouring treacle, came from somewhere very near to him. Then:

“You killed him. Murderers! Oh, murderers all, you accursed family.” This was followed by another long stomach wrenching moan of grief.

Harry stood statue still fearing some lunatic intruder. Staring though the steam and involuntarily holding his breath, he watched to see if the door handle would turn: he hadn't locked the door and felt like bolting over to secure it to improvise a sort of safe room.

“All your grasping family deserve to die, Piero de' Medici. It's a shame and a pity only Giuliano met his fate that day.” The voice was rasping and harsh. “Bernardo and my nephew, Francesco, could only do half the task with the knife, for they couldn't kill your Lorenzo also. Those inept priests are to blame for that, curse them!”

“You are a pig, Jacopo de' Pazzi!” he snapped. “Ahhh, but look what honeyed vengeance we took on your family. He cried with relish. “You: hanged from the Palazzo Vecchio along with the decomposing Archbishop Salviati—the bastard who plotted with you all. Your precious Francesco de' Pazzi: hanged! And that cur Bernado Baroncelli.” The voice let out a bitter laugh.

The voices wore on at each other in similar vein, one accusing the other hideously. The one Jacopo was given grisly treatment: buried in some church, he was later dug up and dragged through the streets. Buried again, he was apparently disinterred a second time and propped up by children against the door of his own house. His rotting skull being used as a macabre door knocker. Harry listened and wondered if he was having some psychiatric interlude. He felt like his legs might give way.

Then, as if a radio had been suddenly switched off, the voices went silent; in fact, Harry thought it must be a radio programme now the gruesome dialogue had abruptly stopped. Vivifying himself, so to speak, he jumped out the shower, wrapped a towel round him and went to the bedroom. He stopped dead. Harry looked at the pictures disbelievingly: where they had been square to the wall minutes before they were now tilted at crazy angles. “How the...?” he muttered.

Quite alarmed now, Harry went round the house checking for disturbances and turning on all the lights; his house shone out like a small football stadium. He even checked to see if the radio in the kitchen was switched off. Under an impulse, he turned it on to be greeted by some cacophonous crap that masqueraded as music. He twitched the dial and reached a night time phone in programme. “I'd just like to know if anyone else out there has seen aliens slinking about in their garden at night?” the caller was asking. His doom laden voice was deep and croaky, betraying a forty a day smoker. He rambled on about some seriously abstruse theory that was, predictably, all his own work.

“Ye gods! The nutters of the night. That's all I need,” Harry said. “He's enough to make me want to piss off to Pluto.” He wondered if the caller might get kidnapped by the skulking aliens in his shrubbery and thereby give humanity a chance; then whispered, “Probably no such fucking luck.”

Satisfied that windows and doors were still secure he went back to the bedroom. Harry slowly approached the paintings and then, hesitantly, straightened them. Suspending his disbelief, he put it down to a sudden baffling draught—perhaps wind gusting down the chimney. Still, even with this explanation, he had a creepy ‘not alone’ feeling crawling up his spine and making its way,

steady as a march of ants, to his neck. He spun round suddenly frightened. “Get a grip, man!” he chided himself.

Harry got back into bed after climbing into a clean set of pyjamas and propped himself up. He wasn't going to sleep tonight. The wind and rain was still engulfing the house. Nameless things banged in the street and he heard a roof tile crash nearby. Harry remembered the newspaper story of the famous ‘hurricane’ in the eighties. A huge piece of thick plastic had taken flight from a flat roof and hit a chimney at colossal speed, bringing it down into a bloke's bedroom where he was getting over the flu. Had it hit him his recovery would have been pointless. After, what seemed like hours, Harry dozed off despite the meteorological turmoil outside.

His slumber was short. A furious exchange started up again and in astonishment he fell from his bed. He got up and stared across the room to where the voices emanated. “The fucking things are talking to each other!” he cried aloud in shock and fear. Every nerve ending on his head started to tingle. With a scream he fled the room smashing into the door jamb in his panic, giving himself a huge blow to the chin which dislodged two teeth. He careered madly to the top of the stairs, and in his wild haste to get out the house, tripped. Harry fell headlong tumbling over and over, finally hitting the bottom with an ominous crash.

Harry was eventually discovered some days later, as a neighbour reported all the lights on day and night and thought it warranted investigation. Harry was found at the bottom of the stairs in a heap, his neck clearly broken as his head was almost looking behind him. Ignominiously, his pyjamas were round his ankles revealing his nakedness. He looked rather ridiculous.

David, Harry's son, came to make the necessary arrangements for the funeral and see that his late father's affairs were up to date. It was while looking through his dad's various papers that he came across the receipt for the two panel paintings in his father's bedroom. Now, David took a particular interest in this because he had been to art school. He was intrigued that such paintings cost so little. Therefore, after a few days he went in search of the shop taking the elaborate receipt with him. David had no clear idea of why he wanted to do this. He had a vague notion the paintings were quite valuable; but if so, their price was ludicrous. He felt, also, a strange presence around them and it made him jittery. David found the lane and turned into it. At first he thought it was the wrong lane, as there was no shop at the number on the receipt: well, there was, but not a bookshop. David found himself looking into a small 7/11 supermarket. He walked about searching, but nothing. David thought this really odd and asked about, but no one remembered a shop anything like the one he described: seemingly, it had vanished.

That night, as David slept in the spare room, he thought he could hear people arguing somewhere—probably just outside in the street. It seemed a bitter argument, he thought, through his sleepy haze.

Part 3.

Now that the funeral was over, David contacted a classy firm of art auctioneers to get some idea of the worth of the two paintings. Two days later he was in the office of a London firm laying the two portraits out on a large mahogany table. Two experts were in attendance and both admired the quality of the work: its colour, details, and the expert rendering. David left them with the

auctioneers so they could do some research, and went back to Brighton to conclude his father's affairs. Some days later he received a call from the company asking him to come back up to London. David went again in the afternoon of the next day, but no wiser than before, as the auctioneer said he wanted to talk to David in person. David reached the office about 4pm and was, to his amazement, shown straight into a plush room. It was quite a step up from his first visit and encouraged he sat in a large Chesterfield. Coffee was brought for him and a selection of biscuits.

The door opened after a few minutes and two rather posh figures strode confidently into the room. These were not the men he saw previously. They introduced themselves as senior partners. David's heart was beating quickly now as he smelt money.

"Well, Mr Fielding, we have a very interesting story for you and also an offer we hope you will consider most seriously." It was the taller of the two who spoke first. His voice was mellow and well-practiced; something between a solicitor and a lounge lizard. He was also quite swarthy. David thought he would be the one who would conduct whatever negotiations they were starting.

"Very interesting, indeed. We've tracked down who these two people are—and in quite some detail too," the other added. In looks, he was clearly the more pleasure seeking of the two: fully girthed with sensual red lips that could do justice to Botox. A premiere league two fisted drinker, David thought.

"Firstly, be assured we're very happy to tell you, Mr Fielding, that they are late fifteenth century Italian," the taller confirmed with a wide smile and gleaming teeth.

"Florentine actually, unsurprisingly." The shorter now. David wondered if they were some kind of regular double act at these gigs.

This thought was confirmed when his partner went on to explain, "What you have here, Mr Fielding, are portraits of Jacopo de' Pazzi," and he held up one of the small pictures in a white gloved hand, "and here, Piero di Cosimo de' Medici, called 'The Gouty'. Both were noble Florentines in the quattrocento and both were head of their respective family; however, Piero had died earlier in 1469 and the succession went to his eldest son, Lorenzo. Lorenzo sported the appellation 'The Magnificent'."

"Eh? The quat what?" David queried.

"Fourteen hundreds, Mr Fielding. The fourteen hundreds." Again, it was an interjection by the florid, venal one.

"What you have here, Mr Fielding, are two rival members of the most powerful families in Florence; a piece of history relating to the Congiura dai Pazzi or Pazzi Conspiracy. And a gory one it was Mr Fielding, with much high drama and bloodshed!"

David's eyes widened, more because he could see pound signs and hear the ring of a till.

“Now imagine the scene Mr Fielding: it is Easter Sunday and High Mass is being chanted in Florence’s Santa Maria delle Fiore cathedral. A crowd of around ten thousand has gathered outside and all the nobles of Florence are inside. Sacred music and swirling incense. But in this sacrosanct space an assignation plot to kill Lorenzo and his brother is about to unfold.

“At the elevation of the host, Lorenzo’s brother, Giuliano de’ Medici, is suddenly set upon by Francesco de’ Pazzi and his friend Bernardo Bandini dei Baroncelli and savagely murdered. A skull splitting blow from a sword strikes him and he is stabbed some nineteen times in the chest. Worshipers fall back in horror as blood spurts from Giuliano’s brain and heart. Francesco’s blood lust is so fierce he even stabs himself in the leg.

“As Giuliano bleeds to death on the cathedral’s marble floor, Lorenzo is attacked also; two priests who were coerced into the plot grab him from behind. Lorenzo is standing up by the high altar and the priests being unschooled in the art of assassination fail to make a lethal strike. Despite receiving a stab wound in the neck he escapes to the sacristy with the aid of his friend Angelo Ambrogini—better known by his nickname Poliziano.”

The other partner took over the narrative: “High drama indeed, Mr Fielding. There were many famous co plotters who lent help, but principally it was Pope Sixtus IV, Francisco Salviati the Archbishop of Pisa, and the famous condottiere Federico da Montefeltro with his six hundred men who were to secure the city when the brothers had been killed.

“A coordinated attempt to capture the Gonfaloniere and the Signoria—rather like our Mayor and Council—was thwarted when the archbishop and head of the Salviati clan were trapped in a room where the doors were held by a hidden latch. Jacopo de’ Pazzi went to the Piazza Vecchio to persuade the crowds to support the coup, but with mixed success; worse, the Papal supported troops didn’t arrive and without the capture of the Signoria and lock down of the city, the plot then ultimately failed,” his voice trailing to a soft dramatic whisper.

David sat transfixed at the story and super transfixed at the thought of what this might do to up his financial rewards.

“Now, imagine the fear of the Pazzi and their co-conspirators,” the other continued. “Bloodshed and revenge follow: the Piazza Vecchio becomes a theatre of grim reckoning. With popular outrage and family retribution, corpses of the guilty soon lay about the city. Over the next few days the Pazzi family are executed or exiled. Others, are beaten and mutilated. Francesco de’ Pazzi is hanged from the third window of the Loggia dei Lanzi along with Archbishop Salviati. Old Jacopo de’ Pazzi and the priest conspirators suffer the same fate. Bernardo Baroncelli flees to Constantinople but later is captured and returned in fetters for execution. In all, over eighty conspirators are dead.

“The Pazzi name was then expunged from Florence, Mr Fielding—the dolphin arms of the family chiselled off stone and street names changed. Anyone bearing the Pazzi name were made to change it; anyone married into the Pazzi were barred from public office.”

The relator looked at David and could see he was fully engaged in the narrative. David thought this was the time to cut to the chase.

“That’s quite a back story! So, this must make them quite valuable works of art then? If, and I say if, I wanted to sell them, that is.” David intended to play this close to his chest.

“Oh, indeed, Mr Fielding!” The two partners said almost in unison. David had an image of Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

“At auction they could raise many thousands each. But there again, maybe not. It can be quite uncertain. You may not even get your reserve. Can be difficult,” said the corpulent partner. “Which is why we want you to consider selling the pictures in a private sale. Mr Westerman here is prepared to offer you a very large sum to have them in his collection at home.” He indicated his tall business partner.

“Large sum, you say?” David found it hard to enunciate as he had a very dry mouth now.

“A million pounds. In cash.” David realised that it was actually the corpulent guy conducting the details of this negotiation. He’d got it all wrong.

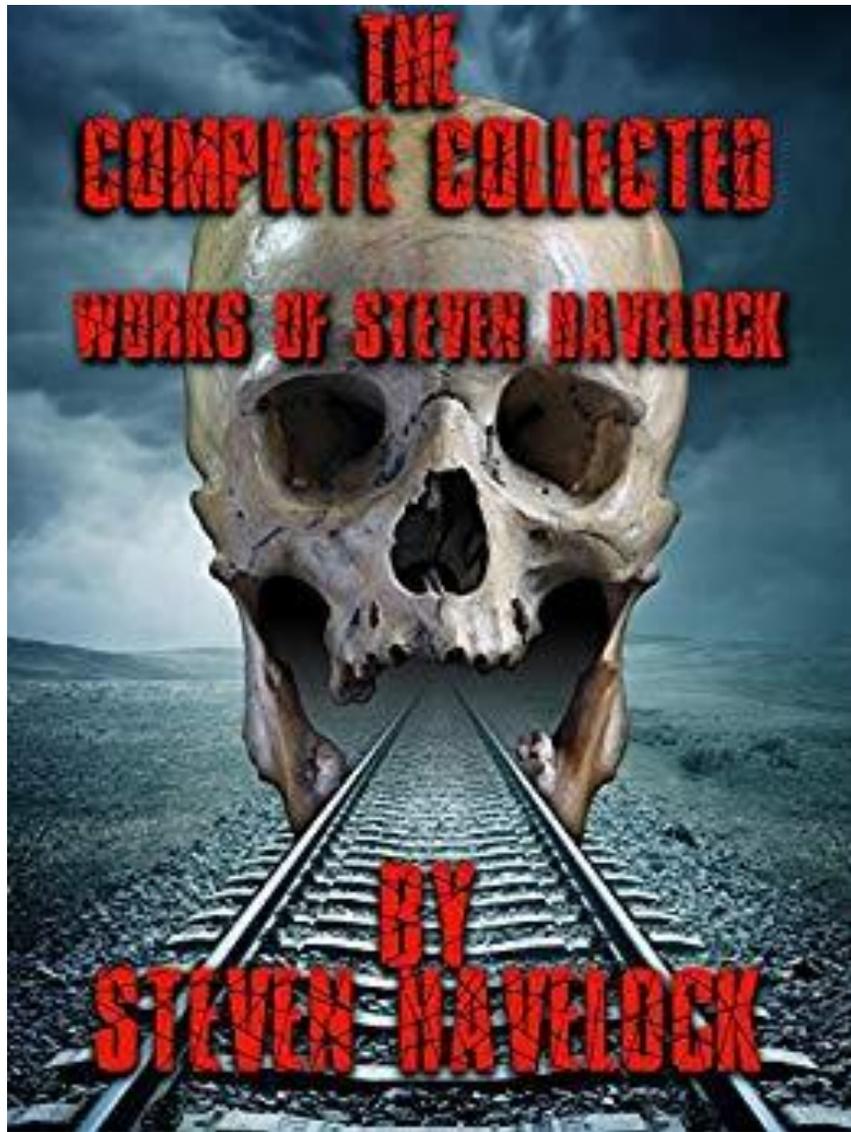
“You see, Mr Fielding, I would really love to have them. Really I would!” Mr Westerman cried. I have a particular interest in Florentine history, which explains the large sum I am prepared to pay. My offer is a very good one, sir.”

David was thinking if he could talk the price up, but he was young and inexperienced in these things. The thought of a million pounds was too tempting to mess up by being greedy. David accepted the deal. Mr Westerman had a private bill of sale ready prepared and took David’s bank details. Within fifteen minutes David was able to confirm the transfer and ‘as happy as Larry’ he left the offices.

*Novis finis.*

Mr Westerman had fallen asleep on the sofa in his living room. It was well after 12 o’clock and the lighting was dim; he could just make out the two newly acquired portraits he was so pleased to have. He let out a sigh of happiness. Then his blood began to run cold: the screams and accusations of murder rang around the room.

THE END



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IDEALISATION by Christopher T Dabrowski. Translation by Monika Olasek.

1

The convict was brought to the room by force and fastened to the bed with belts. He took turns to curse, prey for mercy and promise to be good. No one listened to him, though.

Tom Hamilton, aged thirty four, a serial murderer showing incredible cruelty. His family didn't want to know him. And the families of the victims didn't want to see the last moments of his life. This was not frequent, as many people had the erroneous feeling that they would not find peace until they see with their own eyes the death of the murderer of their loved ones.

In such circumstances, Hamilton was a perfect candidate for the experiment.

This time, execution was performed in a secret laboratory specializing in human consciousness research. Until now, a series of experiments were performed using living patients and a few in hospitals, in terminally ill volunteers. The research showed that at the moment of death, an enormous amount of energy appears in the brain of the dying person; this energy accumulates in the very top of the head and disappears in split seconds.

No one could explain where it came from and what happened to it later.

Earlier, a series on experiments with rats was performed; using EEG, their brains were examined just after decapitation. Within a few seconds, the energy level dropped to such a low value that it was deemed to be lack of consciousness. However, after another thirty to forty seconds, unexplainable phenomenon took place—in the brains of dead animals, a strong electric wave appeared.

The aim of the current experiment was to transfer the brain of a dying murderer to a computer. The scientists hoped that this would allow them explain what happened to a person after death.

Before this, a few attempts to map all neuronal connections in the brain were made, in order to facilitate their activity in a software application. Unfortunately, the digital brain didn't work. So, they decided to take the thing one step further and to culture an artificial brain. To obtain this, a conversion of regular mature skin cells was used; the cells were transformed into pluripotent stem cells. And since these can be programmed to become any human tissue during their growth, the scientists wanted to grow an artificial brain based on such cells. To this goal, they created conditions that ideally mimicked those in the mother's womb. They even grew an artificial heart along with vasculature, since this was the only way to feed the brain during its development.

When the first such brain was grown, they decided to grow several more—not only to study consciousness, but also to test new therapies for conditions like Alzheimer's syndrome, Parkinson's syndrome or post traumatic syndrome.

Unfortunately, the first attempts to “power on” such a brain failed. Although it was a living, organic thing, it didn’t have consciousness—it was in a way sleeping, waiting for something to trigger its activity.

They decided to go a step further and to “power on” the brain using the mysterious energy that gathered in the head upon death. A special device was constructed to capture and pass the energy to the artificial brain, into which a special computer was already connected to process neuronal impulses.

After all, paralyzed people could control the computer using their brain waves. This time, it was the artificial brain with transplanted consciousness that was supposed to do that.

The scientists gathered around the instruments. The convict kept begging for mercy.

His heart rhythm was monitored via a cardiomonitor. There was a catheter in his body and an infusion pump was attached to it. After a while, the execution supervisor, in agreement with the head of the scientific team, nodded to the technical worker, who started the machine.

Three substances injected one after another by the pump were used to kill Tom Hamilton:

Thiopental—at a dose of 3 grams, which triggered loss of consciousness within ten seconds.

Pancuronium—at a dose of 100 milligrams. This agent, known also as “Pavulon” results in muscle relaxation and paralysis of respiratory system within thirty seconds.

The last component of the deadly set was potassium chloride which stops the heart beat in the diastolic phase.

2

When Tom Hamilton was asked, why he had murdered all those people, said:

‘I was killing myself. I can’t help that it was the witnesses who died, after all.’

As a child, he went through a lot, beaten and humiliated by his parents, and as a result, as psychologists explained—his delicate “self” vulnerable to internal harm and his hard “non self” got split. From the moment when this irreversible disfigurement occurred in an unformed child’s brain, little Tom started seeing the world and people as his foes. Everything around him was bad, and he expected all experiences from the external world to be painful. So he sort of fell into himself; hid in his internal world, moving away from the reality as far as he could. He built an internal wall, and no one from the outside could break through to him. Well, since his parents were his enemies, no one could be trusted. Since they were so bad, in Tom’s opinion, all the others—no matter how hard they tried to get closer to him and convince him they were his friends—had to be bad, but masked their real intentions.

When Tom grew up, the years of humiliation and torturing resulted in such a fear for world that the only medicine was to do to the others, what he expected any moment from them. But apart from hate for the other people, he hated himself. This was the result of lack of parental love, and most of all, of their sadism against him—he hated himself for the fact that his parents hated him. He believed he was evil and not worth anything, since they could not love him. Upon murdering his victims, he felt that he was killing not only external enemies, but also himself—in such moments he saw himself in them.

3

As predicted by the scientists, they managed to capture the energy of the dying man and transfer it to the artificial brain. Unfortunately, after two seconds, the energy disappeared. Everyone was asking just one question:

*WHY?*

This wasn't logical, because the energy could enter the creation that would extend its existence. Every living thing aims at extending its life and tries to postpone its death as long as possible.

Some of those who took part in the experiments asked themselves a quiet question, embarrassing in the scientific environment:

Maybe this was the soul?

4

In another secret military laboratory dealing with artificial intelligence, another breakthrough experiment was conducted at the same time. A moment before a robot was initiated—its brain was formed of billions of nanomolecules that were intended to mimic neuronal function. They were supposed to be controlled by a human mind—a genius scientists working on artificial intelligence agreed to have it transferred. According to his theory, the energy leaving the body at the moment of death contained something that he called “mind code” which, upon passing through an appropriately programmed nanomolecules, would make them a perfectly reflected neuronal system—an ideal copy of his brain. And Professor Salomon Kane believed that this would make him immortal.

He didn't believe in a thing like “soul”. But the mind was a scientific fact for him. The mind coded in energy impulses that needed an artificial brain to operate in a material world.

The body of the genius was lying in the next room, covered with a bed sheet.

The robot was in the corner of a room, isolated from the rest of the laboratory.

According to all readings, the experiment should be successful—the energy from the professor’s body was aimed at the robot’s head. The machine was designed in such a way to operate only after the artificial nanomolecular brain was formed. This was supposed to take no more than two seconds. Ten seconds had already passed and nothing happened.

‘Sorry, gentlemen...’ Professor Takamoto, the head of the experiment, sighed with regret.

5

Ever since he could remember, Professor Salomon Kane believed that humankind is a group of dumbasses, and that it was pure miracle that they hadn’t killed one another yet. He dreamt of creating an artificial mind without any human faults. He believed himself to be someone special, someone much more developed than the rest of humans—it was his mind that was to be the standard.

He wanted to create a few such creatures—he believed they wouldn’t be just robots—and connect them into an artificial reality simulator. A simulator where the humankind would be almost extinct and they would be the last—according to them—representatives of the species. But they would be ideal! In the further course of the experiment, these artificially created minds would believe that the simulator is a real world and they would start rebuilding it, thus creating a new reality. The Great New World—this is just what was supposed to be created—an example of what an ideal world ruled by “ideal people” should look like. And considering the fact that everything would happen much faster in the virtual reality—since it wouldn’t have “time” as defined by our criteria and the rate of changes and events would depend only on the calculating capacity of the artificial brains and the simulation computer—the formation of this world would be a matter of a few hours.

Then, development of the virtual race of ideal people could be analysed and the solutions and ideas could be transferred to the real world. But Professor Salomon had no doubts: even if everything worked, the human trash living on Earth and degenerating it would not take this seriously. They wouldn’t accept the solutions, as they would be too controversial. Nevertheless, this would be a basis for creation of an ideal world and who knows, maybe one of his followers would eventually bring all this into life. Create new people, make them smart, beautiful and immortal.

Unfortunately, time is created in such a way, that it rushes at a very fast speed and lasts the same for a wise man and for stupid human trash.

At a certain moment of his life, the professor understood that he wouldn’t be able to carry out this plan, as he was too old for it and he wouldn’t have enough time. And then he had the idea that he could try to become immortal—if only he could transfer his mind into an indestructible brain in an indestructible body...

He would have as much time for research as he could only dream of.

6

The first fraction of the second of existence:

Capturing electromagnetic waves. Creating infopath maps. Reviewing the world internet. Selecting information. Downloading data believed to be scientifically confirmed facts. Ordering of data.

The second fraction of the second of existence:

Realizing own existence and...

'I'm here,' he realized within a microsecond.

'I'm Salomon Kane. Professor. A genius. I have a mission,' this he realized only a microsecond later.

'I died...'

'I was reborn in XT-44. I am a human mind in a non-human body, in a... machine,' he realised during the next microsecond.

He also understood that his new brain had more options than a human brain. It was not just remembering and processing data. Here, he was equal to the most sophisticated computers. He realized that human brains are genetically blocked and this obstruction prevented them from using 100% of their potential.

He didn't have that obstacle...—he had no genes. He could...

7

Akira Takamoto sighed heavily and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He was 100% sure the experiment had failed. Suddenly, he realized that the robot had moved. Everyone gathered at the Venetian mirror and waited impatiently for the next events.

'I am XT-44,' said the robot in its mechanical voice.

Takamoto cleared his throat nervously and came to the microphone.

'Have you got Professor Salomon Kane in you?'

'Salomon Kane is dead,' a cold, inhuman voice answered.

Akira turned out the microphone and shook his head. Failure, after all.

‘His soul has left. I don’t have its data,’ the robot added unexpectedly. ‘His personality was useless. It was deleted. All logical and creative capacities were maintained. I can continue. His work. His genius is coded. In my brain.’

‘Maybe not everything is lost after all?’ Professor Takamoto was truly relieved.

Half a success is still a success. Maybe artificial intelligence as such was not created, but if it was really possible to keep everything that formed the genius of Professor Salomon Kane then... his great mind would be able to serve the goodness of mankind for an infinite number of generations. And if all this was connected with calculation power of a computer and its ability to gather and process data—maybe they had just created the greatest genius of all. Who knows, maybe new inventions would now spring up like flowers after rain and the humankind would make a giant civilization leap.

A dreaming smile rose in the professor’s face.

8

Salomon Kane realized that apart from immortality, he had suprahuman abilities.

Over the next fraction of a second, he reviewed them. At the beginning, he felt that apart from electromagnetic waves, there were also brain waves of higher order, forming a sort of an internet web connecting not machines but human brains into one inseparable completeness. If it wasn’t for the stopper coded in genes, people could easily communicate using telepathy. Everyone with anyone, no matter how near or far. They could do many other things—and the vast scope of possibilities made Salomon more and more bewildered.

He took another fraction of a second to cool off.

9

Wednesday—blue, soft, fluffy.

A memory path starts playing ‘Carmina Burana’ by Carl Orff.

The sounds light up with colours. Brownish gold is mixed with sapphire, then sudden splashes of pink turn into greyish green.

The music silences off. White silence prevails.

The sound of a burr. Toothache, although there are no teeth. Improvement. Relief.

The memory of a meadow tastes like vanilla. Nice.

The red sound like a low brumm, making the non-existent skin tingle.

All sensations are written in the brain. The faulty senses are no longer necessary. They can be mixed, experimented and intensified.

Synaesthesia for pleasuring yourself.

Kane knew that not only synesthetics can experience that—take people after LSD as an example. However, their sensations were short term, and the experiencing person was totally torn from the reality. This indicated that synaesthesia was just another ability blocked in most people by the messy genes.

And what about him?—He could have it all time—for eternity—and it wouldn't bother him a bit. Not with his brain work. He discovered already that he could make partitions of his brain—one part would deal with re-experiencing of the most pleasant memories. The second one would experience indescribable ecstasy offered by synaesthesia. The third one would continue his research. The fourth one would take care of dreaming—he loved dreaming. And all this would happen at the same time and wouldn't interfere with his normal functions.

10

A ten year old Siergiey was playing war. Trying as hard as he could, he was setting two armies of plastic soldiers opposite each other. These were Russians and of course Americans.

Suddenly, completely out of the blue, both armies rose into the air.

The boy froze, watching the phenomenon with his mouth wide open.

A moment later, the statues fell to their places safely. There was a quiet whizz in the boy's head. The same moment, he forgot everything.

A forty year old Ahmed Al Tariq was just working at a ramp 150 metres above the ground; he was building another skyscraper in the city of Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. He liked the work because of the quite good money, amazing views and the chance to live every moment with intensity. This work requiring non-human concentration added taste to his life—he had learnt to transfer this mindfulness to every moment and every activity he performed. This made him realize that the most important thing is to sense the moment with every cell of your body. It made him happy.

Ahmed heard a voice in his head. The voice told him to get up and jump into the bottomless abyss brightened by the city lights.

He knew it was crazy, but the voice was so overwhelming that it took control over Ahmed's actions. And Al Tariq felt it was good. That he was doing the right thing. The voice was like a promise of still greater happiness. It was seducing, alluring, attracting. And there was nothing more important in the world than the voice and its orders.

Ahmed rose to his feet and jumped.

He was falling down; the loud hiss of air silenced screaming of his friends.

Suddenly, he stopped in the air. And he wasn't surprised.

He started moving upward. A moment later, he was back where he was before he jumped. He sat down and felt a whizzing in his head. The very same moment, he forgot everything. The same thing happened in the heads of the other construction workers.

11

Immortality! Unlimited possibilities! Telekinesis! Telepathy! Synaesthesia! Bilocation!

Ability to materialize objects from molecules present in the air!

It took Professor Salomon Kane another fraction of a second to test his new capabilities. But he did it secretly enough not to leave any traces of his experiments in human brains.

Since there were no limitations for him and since he had access to the gathered consciousness, he could control all people in the world. He could also use their brains as a sort of mental enhancers—to perform telekinesis, he passed his brain waves through the brain of a ten year old Siergiey and this way he could influence the material reality.

Everything was possible, because human brains formed a joined consciousness, the so called super mind—and he had access to all its wonders.

'I am another step of evolution,' he realized. 'I am superhuman!'

He was so thrilled that for a moment he felt almost like God. But the very same moment there was a cold shower of thoughts:

'To be God, I would have to create new universes—and the risk that I could be destroyed in the event of disobedience is too big.' He felt he wasn't developed enough to be able to take control over all people in the world at the same time.

For now, he decided to pretend he was just a robot and the experiment was successful only partially. But he already had a plan...

12

'I have a dream!' He also had his dream. He wanted to create a Great New World.

A world of robots with organic coating and all stimulus receptors, which, along with synaesthesia, would allow them to multiply experiencing human sensual delights.

They would be immortal and yet they wouldn't destroy the planet—they wouldn't cut trees, contaminate waters. They wouldn't kill animals to eat their dead bodies. They wouldn't need plants, either. Machines don't need food—unless they want to experience primitive sensual pleasures.

They don't have to reproduce, which would keep the population stable—they would make new machines only to colonize new planets. As an ideal form of life—this is just what consciousness released from its body is—they would be able to achieve things unachievable for a human being:

Live in all the space—nothing will limit them, after all.

He would allow his subordinates some free will, but at the same time, he would be a sort of semi God. He would improve himself to such a level to be the brain that controls the joint consciousness, to be able to take control over harmful individuals and to eliminate them from the society.

Humankind... unnecessary, lower form of life that must be limited in terms of numbers. And be kept in special reservation areas in order to map the brains of the smartest individuals—when it is necessary to expand the superhuman population.

13

Moscow. Secret military laboratory. Professor Lukianin heard a short command in his mind—to produce a series of robots with a human mind transferred into a nanomolecular artificial brain. And he knew this would be good. The voice was hypnotizing and made Lukianin want to surrender to its commands at once.

But he didn't know how to do it.

Within a split second, he had a brilliant recipe—instructions on how to build a robot. Not wasting any more time, Lukianin started working.

At the same time, his subordinates obtained an order to support professor in any possible way. Everything had to be strictly secret.

The same commands were obtained by scientists working in the laboratories all over the world. And all of this happened in the first second of XT-44 functioning.

14

In the next fraction of a second, Salomon Kane was surprised to find out that in a different state, in one of the laboratories, there was an artificially created organic brain with a mind of a different person.

He decided to check it out. Within a few milliseconds, he connected to the artificial brain. It was the mind of Tom Hamilton—trapped, frightened, senseless in that weird creation.

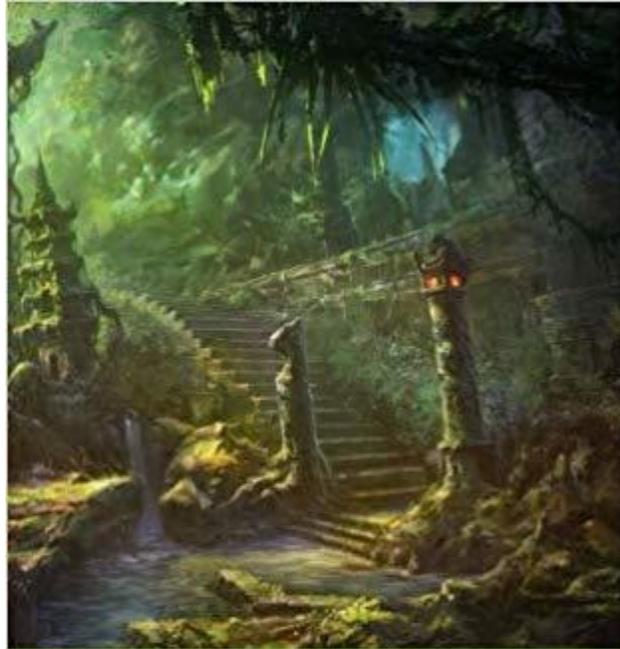
When he was finalizing the contact, Salomon Kane felt no threat. Unfortunately, the moment later he felt black, slimy tentacles of the second mind slither into his own mind. He felt them penetrating him to combine into one. It was like a computer virus. The second mind was trying to take command and it was evil. It caught Kane's mind and wouldn't let go. And every microsecond, like a poison, it was leaking into Kane's mind.

In another fraction of a second, Salomon Kane and Tom Hamilton became one mind—an evil genius.

15

During the 2nd second of XT-44 activity, in all laboratories of biological weapons in the world, the scientists heard a voice in their heads. It commanded them to take the most deadly microbes from the laboratories and to release them in city centres. This voice was so alluring that they felt it would be good. They decided to finalize their task immediately.

THE END



**Sherlock Holmes**

and the Beast-men of Atlantis

**Milly 'Mad Dog'  
McGuigan**

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JUNKIE by Steven Havelock

Luke saw a distant sun burning brightly in the hellish orange sulphuric sky. All around him he heard the cries and screams of the damned.

*Lucky for me I'm not stopping, just visiting,* he thought with a wry smile.

Luke looked to his right and saw a demon rushing towards him. He aimed his rocket blaster and let rip. The demon exploded into a million pieces.

*Whoa! I'm nearly there! I've nearly reached my highest score.*

Suddenly the miasma of hell first faded to blue light and then vanished altogether.

“Sorry, Luke, that’s it, we should have been shut thirty minutes ago.”

“Aww, maan! Come on, just another ten minutes!”

“Sorry, Luke, some of us have families to go to,” said Jason, the owner of ‘VR Experience 1000’.”

Luke’s surroundings changed from the deepest darkest scenes of hell into a large warehouse building with sensors on all of the walls.

“Okay. Well, see you guys tomorrow for some more fun demon blasting! You know I nearly reached the world record on that game ‘Demon Spawn’!”

“Yes, we know, Luke. You’ve been trying get to that record for the last twelve months.”

“Okay, later,” said Luke and exited the building. He felt thoroughly grumpy at having to stop playing.

*I was nearly there!*

Outside the dark, solitary moon hung brightly in the winter sky.

*God, it's cold out today.*

Luke turned around and headed home. As he walked down the empty lonely streets, he thought to himself.

*I'm a junkie. Not your typical drugs or alcohol type junkie but a junkie none the less. My vice is the latest craze in hi tech games. I'm a junkie for sure. A VR junkie. Day after day, week after week and month after month I've been playing 'Demon spawn'. I can't wait until tomorrow to try and beat the world high score, I need to do it tonight.*

The time was 12 midnight. The whole area was deserted and empty of life. Luke had parked his car several blocks away and now he approached 'VR Experience 1000' premises. He had with him a black sports bag which he now opened and pulled out a large crow bar from.

He took a quick look around.

*No one about, good.*

He placed the crowbar in place, seeing by the light of the moon, and jerked it all the way back. There was a loud cracking sound as the door gave way.

*Now it's fun time!*

He entered the premises and switched on the computers. Soon he was ready to play. He put the VR headset on and initiated the game.

After forty minutes he was sweating.

*Nearly there! I nearly beat the world record!*

Then he came to a scene he had never got to before. In front of him was a giant, twenty foot, red yellow fire coloured demon.

*This is the final boss! Bring it on!*

"I am your death. I am total darkness. I am the Devil!"

"Okay, okay come on then little doggy. Don't just yap all day!"

Luke brought up his weapons from the HUD display and selected the most powerfulest ones—the rocket launcher and laser pistol.

"Let's see if you have some bite!"

The demon just laughed. For some strange reason it gave Luke the creeps.

*Let's do this!* he thought, wiping his sweaty palms on his jeans and adjusting the VR display on his head.

Luke let loose with all his weapons, attacking when the chance presented itself and dodging and defending when needed.

*God, this demon is a lot tougher than the others!*

Luke gave it his all and eventually the demon collapsed to the floor.

He heard the sound of a till ringing and then the words.

‘New high world record reached!’

*Yes! I have been trying to get this record for the past twelve months! I’ve done it! I’ve finally done it!*

Suddenly the demon on the ground started to rise.

*What?*

“Now let’s play a proper game!” the demon screeched.

“What? What do you mean?”

The demon attacked. Luke fought back with all his weapons and might but the demon seemed to be on another level, and none of Luke’s attacks seemed to work.

*God! I’m totally exhausted. I can’t go on. Got to get out of here.*

Luke pressed the ‘end simulation’ button but nothing happened. He hit it again a few more times but still nothing happened, and now he heard the demon’s laughter ringing all around him.

“I’m taking you to hell!”

Luke grabbed his headset and pulled. Suddenly the landscape of hell was transformed into a normal dark quiet warehouse.

He walked slowly to the exit, sweat dripping of his forehead and arms, and his tracksuit damp with the sweat.

*I entered that hellish landscape willingly but now am so glad to exit! Never again as long as I live am I playing this game or any other VR game ever again! High score or no high score!*

His blood seemed to freeze as he noticed something. In his left hand was the rocket launcher from the game.

What the—?

The boss demon was standing in front him.

“Now let’s play for real!” it screeched.

Luke lifted the rocket launcher and let loose. It struck the demon in its face, it collapsed to the floor lifeless.

*What the hell is going on!*

He turned to leave. As he reached the door his blood seemed to chill again and the hairs on his neck rose. He looked behind and saw the demon had arisen.

*Oh God no! This can't be happening!*

It moved towards him. Luke dashed for the exit but in his haste dropped the rocket launcher. In the dark empty street, he started to run.

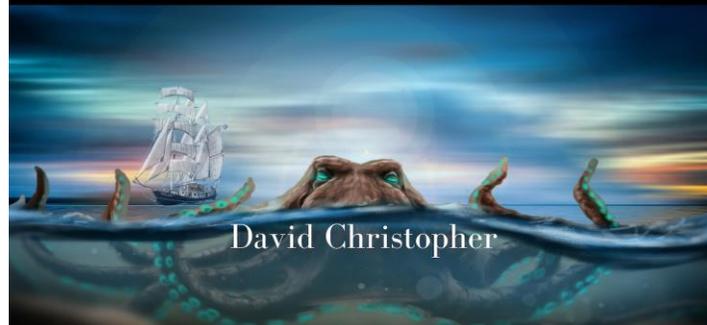
He looked behind once.

*It's after me!*

THE END

GONZO PULP PUBLICATIONS  
PRESENT

# Long John Silver and the Squid-God of Lemuria



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Within the next hour, Wayne left the house after giving Tom tasks to complete around the house (as he pretended to take out the trash yet again), and warned his son again to keep away from Heather and Alan. “Oh, and hope you Alan gets help with his ahmeebaahh,” he laughed. Once his father’s van turned at the end of the street, Tom ran to the Buick and began tampering with the wires, trying to remember what Alan had shown him. Billy watched through the kitchen window and once his brother gave him a thumbs up, he waved as his brother sped off out of the backyard and toward the highway.

At 3 AM when Wayne Poole returned home, the Buick was not in the backyard, though he was too tired to notice. Ten hours later, he woke up hating everything, but much of his unbridled disgust was levelled at Tom when he realized that none of the tasks he had assigned the previous afternoon had been completed; his disgust morphed into rage when he saw that the Buick was nowhere to be seen. He was probably off with that whore. He couldn’t wait to see what kind of fish story Tom had prepared.

Wayne needed a beer. He needed six. How the hell did that little shit take the car without the goddamn keys? He’d deal with him when he got home. Hope you’re havin’ fun with your buddy and your whore...this’ll be the last. Until then, he’d get a good buzz and see what he could get out of Billy. As he opened the refrigerator, the back door did, as well, and in stepped his quarry.

“Oh...hey, Dad,” Billy said gently.

“Where you been?”

“Fishing, Dad.” Billy knew from Tom’s demeanour yesterday that he would have been against his little brother going to the pond, seeing as how Alan got hurt there, but the boy was curious and he had a mission. Not only did he want to retrieve his brother’s fishing rod, but he wanted to see one of those weird things Tom mentioned for himself, if there were any, so he also brought his own rod and a little Igloo container that he used to carry Pepsi when he’d fish with Tom. In case he found one.

“See you got his rod. Got any fish stories, too?” Wayne asked with disgust. There were only a few cans of beer left. He’d send Tom out for more later...after he re-established dominance, of course. “You seen your brother at the pond?” Let’s see if the little one will lie for his older brother. Like Joe used to lie for me back in the day. Heh. That lil’ bastard. Wayne plucked a fresh Blue Ribbon from the fridge and slammed it closed.

“No, sir.” Billy placed his brother’s rod and his own next to the door and carried the Igloo container in his free hand.

“C’mere,” Wayne commanded, pulling the tab. Billy sheepishly walked to his father, looking up at him slowly. As Wayne reached for his son’s head, he saw Billy flinch; if only Tom knew that

kind of respect. He patted him firmly. “You ain’t tellin’ me no fish stories, are ya? Covering for Tom?”

“No, sir.” He was telling the truth, and Wayne could see it.

“Okay, then. You know when he left? Where he went?”

With the same peaceful tone, Billy answered again, “No, sir.” He was lying, but Wayne couldn’t see it. For whatever reason, maybe due to his more innocent demeanour or that he simply had a better, youthful poker face, Wayne seemed to generally believe Billy quicker than his brother. It wasn’t fool proof, though, and he only lied—told fish stories—now to help protect Tom; they both did to protect each other.

“I hope so. Hell, he prolly went off with Alan and...that little...eh, don’t be like Tom...you know what’ll happen, boy.” He took a swig. “Catch anything down at the pond?”

“Yeah,” Billy replied, holding up the container and placing it on the counter. “No fish, though. Just a funny lookin’ thing.”

“Funny how, boy?”

“Don’t know, Dad...not like any fish I ever seen before. Just like Tom said, no fish down there. Just whatever it is. I saw a few movin’ around, but only got one that didn’t fall off the line. Was able to get it into the Igloo.”

“Christ, not you, too,” Wayne groaned. “Don’t start that shit with me, being a goddamn liar like him.”

Knowing better than to argue and knowing too well that he wasn’t making it up, Billy held his tongue and didn’t continue.

“You sure you ain’t seen him?” his father probed again.

“Yes, sir. I haven’t seen Tom.” He hadn’t, not since he took the Buick the previous afternoon. He figured that maybe he was able to find Alan and the others and get him to the hospital, maybe staying overnight with him. That was what he hoped, at least. He said he’d be back last night, though, and it wasn’t like Tom to not fulfil a promise. Tom sure would be mad if he knew Billy had went to the pond—had brought one of those things back. But maybe it might help Alan if they had one of those things. They could identify it, experiment on it. Something.

“Awright,” his father said. “But if you happen see him before me, you...you better not warn him. We have some things to talk about. And you better stay the hell out of it.”

“Yes, sir. I...I gotta go to the bathroom.” Billy left the kitchen and Wayne listened for the bathroom door click.

Finishing his first beer of the day with another long swallow, Wayne returned to the fridge for another and turned his attention to the Igloo container. “No fish, huh? I think both of ‘em’s trying to sell me a big one.” He snapped the fresh can open and stepped closer to it, reaching for it with an open hand. Nearly touching it, the container suddenly skated across the kitchen counter about a foot, as though something inside were pushing it, sending Wayne off balance. “Goddamn, nearly spilled my beer!” He sipped the liquid from the rim that had leaked from his near fall.

For its safety, Wayne placed the partially polished off Blue Ribbon on the counter and reached with both hands for the Igloo. Clutching it, he shook it heavily, listening to the water within slosh—whatever was in there, if there even was something in there, had startled him, but not enough to deter his curiosity. Then came another thought: what if it wasn’t an animal at all? Just some kind of electronic toy that moved? Some kind of water proof motion detector? His amusement at the stupidity of the possible prank almost made him forget about how harshly he’d have to educate Tom whenever he slinked back home. “They’re in this damn shit together, tryin’ to scare their old man,” he muttered. “Real funny, boys!” Wayne released the latch and chuckled to himself, looking in.

He couldn’t see any fish nor anything electronic inside, just water. He leaned closer to the container to get a better look and he made out something that resembled the branches of dead trees in the liquid, each a deep purple and twitching. Wayne figured, however, that it was the way the light was hitting the water’s surface—just a trick of the imagination. Maybe they were twigs or something snagged by Billy’s hook, or maybe just debris that somehow managed to get inside. He laughed it off, but then he could see something else resting at the bottom. He couldn’t make it out.

“What the hell’s this?”

As Wayne moved forward, reaching into the container with a tentative hand, he felt a solid object. Small and hollow, he gripped it in his fingers and plucked it from the water. “Now what’s this?” he asked rhetorically, examining the object. It was a bone. It wasn’t thin like a toothpick, like fish bones, but thicker—an animal bone...or a human bone? Turning back to the container to see if there were more, he could swear that the twigs had moved.

The prank, if there was one, was over. Tom wasn’t at home, but there was another. “Billy! Get your ass in here now!”

He inched his face closer to look inside, again seeing the purple branches. They looked like veins or something of that nature to him as they seemed to pulse in rhythm, but again, he felt it was just an illusion. Wayne coughed and the water stirred, bubbles forming on the surface as though something moved...or breathed.

“Huh?” Wayne started to reach for the comfort of his beer can, needing a drink to clear his mind, before a sudden splash and what felt like a net of threading needles pierced their way into the flesh of his face. The mass of the creature, as though it were a plastic bag, constricted around his skull and muffled his screams, though he could still see the room around him through the

distorted, translucent form of the thing. The sharp tendrils dug further in his flesh, twisting and turning into powerful hooks. He reached around him with frantic hands, trying to grab anything to use to pry the thing from his head, managing to knock his beer to the floor and break a number of nearby unwashed drinking glasses and plates.

However, a new sensation overtook his senses in the form of a horrific fire that scorched every inch of his profile, and he howled in utter agony, feverishly clawing at his face as he felt the spines of the animal drill deeper into his flesh. Once he felt his tongue begin to dissolve into fizz, its crimson contents filling his vision before the same bubbling sensation befell his eyes, Wayne ceased the pointless hunt for rescue and tried to run, managing only a few steps before slamming into the kitchen counter, slipping in the spilled lager, and falling to the floor with a clumsy boom, both of his son's fishing rods tipping and landing atop his stomach.

Ah-mee-bah! his mind shrieked as he felt the organism's form reach higher upon his head, engulfing his crown, and it began moving down his neck, as though it were stretching, opening wider. Ah-mee-baaaahhhhhh...truth...wasn't...lie...Tommy wasn't tellin' no... fisssshhhhh...st... B Billlll...

Hearing the commotion from the bathroom at the end of the house, Billy neglected washing his hands after he zipped his jeans to run down the hall and toward the kitchen to find out what the source of the noise was. He figured maybe his father fell down. He had been drinking already, like usual and likely on his third or fourth at this point. He never did have the best balance after a few Blue Ribbons, and maybe Billy could help him into the living room. Afterward, he really needed to figure out what to do with the thing from the pond.

“Dad?”

Perhaps Tom finally came back home and earned a good slap across the jaw. Tom was always an expert at bringing the kind of rage that resulted in a good hit, whether he deserved it or not; after yesterday, the likelihood was almost certain. Billy hated seeing that sort of thing almost as much as being on the receiving end. Coming closer to the kitchen, he couldn't hear anything like Wayne's fist hitting Tom (he'd heard it before, more than he'd like), but he could make out the sounds of low moaning interspersed with choked, wet gurgling.

“Dad?”

Billy Poole saw the large pile of what was shaped like his father twitching on the kitchen floor, a clear sheen like watery plastic writhing over him, spreading and taking in more and more of him. Seeing that the back door was blocked by the mass, the boy turned to run. He nearly made his escape to the living room, but yelped in anguish when the needles wrapped around and plunged into both of his ankles.

Sergeant Joe Poole never made visits to see his brother, yet here he was, pulling into Wayne's driveway with a quartet of other officers. Wayne hadn't been the same since Paula died, but he'd

always been an asshole—now, he was just more of an asshole, and Joe didn't like that, hence his avoidance. But something was wrong, and he was honestly ashamed that it took finding his brother's abandoned Buick alongside a Firebird on Highway 52 coupled with Wayne's boss at the mill saying he hadn't clocked in for three days straight.

He couldn't shake it, but something was indeed off. He just wasn't sure what.

A lot of weird shit was going on as of late in the town anyway, and to Joe, it didn't take a detective to connect the dots as being much more than coincidence. Joe realized this when he learned that the Firebird found with his brother's car belonged to the recently missing Delmont boy. Couple that with two teenage girls in town, one apparently dating Delmont and one dating his nephew, Tommy, and it raised questions. If the cars hadn't been found, some would have assumed that the teens had run off on some escapade, and from what Joe knew of Wayne's disposition, he could understand why in Tommy's case. But the weirdest of the weird shit was the material found within both cars.

Something like mucus or gel, the forensics guy had said. Couldn't tell off hand what it was, just that it wasn't human. Would need to examine further, take a few days, maybe even weeks. And pieces of what looked like bone, but severely eaten away, almost dissolved to nothing. They needed to be examined, as well. It sounded like sci-fi bullshit—Joe dealt in facts and not much else, but he was slowly losing the ability to deny the sheer oddity of the evidence or lack thereof.

And now Wayne was apparently M.I.A., too? Joe hoped nothing was wrong and there was no foul play involved. He didn't care for his brother, sure, but he actually liked Tommy and Billy. They were good boys, all things considered.

The house looked normal when he pulled into the gravel driveway, but his own paranoid feelings made Joe glad he had asked the captain for the extra manpower, which was easily spared in a town that rarely had anything more than DUI's. After all, with everything going on, one could never be too careful. The officers, two sets in two squad cars behind Joe's own, exited their vehicles.

“Another Missing Persons report,” muttered a red headed rookie named Billings.

“Yup,” answered Kern, his passenger and training officer. “Been a lot of those lately.”

“Hell, there always is. It's stupid to come out here with this many uniforms. We're just here because—”

“It's Sarge's brother's house and he wants to check on his family,” answered Rawlins, who slammed the driver's side door closed on his car, followed by his partner, Phelps. “Show some respect, rookie.”

“Sorry,” Billings answered.

Joe and the others surrounded the house and peeked through all openings, spotting no one inside

that they could see. Wayne's van was still there, but no sign of anyone. Rawlins, who had ventured near the back of the house, tried opening the back door on a whim, finding it unlocked. The others followed him inside, and Joe's stomach performed somersaults once he observed the kitchen.

Billings stepped forward past the others and immediately looked down. "What's this shit? Woah!" He slid across the clear liquid and was grabbed by both Phelps and Joe, the latter of which looked about the room and regarded it with a restrained shock.

"Get off it! Everyone, move over here, in the corner! Goddamnit, have to let forensics know that the rookie stepped in evidence...they'll be pissed!"

The police officers all moved to the corner of the kitchen closest to the window as Billings apologized over and over. "It's like...fuckin A, some kinda slime," Phelps concluded.

"Like those abandoned cars off of the highway," Billings said. "They said they had the same sorta thing. Slimy residue on the seats."

"Yeah, said there were some bone fragments or somethin,' too. Weirdest thing."

"Wasn't one of them cars registered to Wayne, Joe?" Rawlins asked.

"Yeah," he answered firmly.

"What's going on? People getting abducted by little green men?" Billings jested. "Apparently that stuff's real, you know."

"Shut it, rookie."

"You two," Joe said, pointing to Billings and Kern, "sweep the house. Don't think anyone's home, but check around."

"Got it," Kern answered.

A minute later, both men returned, and Joe was examining a small collection of white fragments collected near the back door as close as possible without stepping into the ooze.

"What is it?" Billings blurted.

Standing up, Joe sighed. "Looks like bone maybe."

"Jesus," Phelps whispered. "Those cars."

Joe nodded solemnly.

"Damn...you know, this sounds like a story I heard once in scouts," Billings began, pausing, as

though lost in trying to relive an old memory. His voice lowered like he was holding the story stick at the campfire where he had heard the tale that he was now relaying to the others. “Some kinda thing that spewed acid—or was made of it, I can’t remember—and ate the flesh away...left only pieces of bone. Nothin’ else. Would digest everything except that, every time it ate something...or someone...creepy story, but I’ve heard there’s stuff that can do that, though...for real.”

“C’mon, now...don’t tell shit like that. Sounds more like a movie or somethin,’ and now’s not the time,” Rawlins said to the rookie, gesturing to Joe, who was obviously growing annoyed with Billings. Just like everyone else.

“...Sorry,” Billings repeated. “Sorry. But it’s true. At least, that’s what I heard.” He ascertained then that he needed to backpedal before he crashed and burned. “M-Maybe nothin’s wrong. Maybe they’ve all...uh, gone off...” The rookie trailed off, losing faith in his own weak attempt at soothing the sergeant’s mind.

“Anything else on the property that we can check out, Joe?” Kern interrupted.

“...Just a pond a couple of minutes in that direction,” he answered, pointing through the kitchen window to the southeast. “Past the trees.”

“C’mon, Billings,” Kern said. “You and me can go have a look.”

“Again? Why are we doing all the work?”

“Think of it as training, Billings. You need as much as I can give.”

“And you need to be trained on when to shut the hell up,” Rawlins grumbled.

After the rookie was taken outside by his T.O., Phelps and Rawlins turned to Joe. “I’m sorry, Sarge,” Phelps said.

“About what?” Joe tried to contain his growing unease.

“Christ, that slime shit is all out here, too, on the fuckin’ ground!” Billings squealed as he and Kern made their way through the backyard, easily heard by the other officers inside. “Nearly busted my ass in there...ugh, hard enough keeping these shoes polished!”

“Forget the rookie,” Joe continued. “You know, it’s funny—I haven’t talked to Wayne in almost a year. A year. My brother changed so much in that little time. Started soundin’ just like our dad. Hated liars and lies, and I mean hated them. Said that everyone always told him lies—even me, when I tried to help him. Called lies “fish stories” just like Pop. Some fish are bigger than others. To me, fish stories ain’t just lies—they’re farfetched, outlandish, no way in hell they’re true since there’s no evidence or proof.” He pointed to the liquid on the floor. “And this shit seems just one scale away from being one huge fish story. All these missing kids—my nephews—and my brother...who knows who else? Damn weird slime at the scene and goo that may or may not

be bone? I mean, just what in hell is goin' on here?!"

Rawlins and Phelps were silent, hesitant to answer Joe's question. If he had even wanted one, they were at a loss.

"I don't believe fish stories, either, but all this...I am beginnin' to wonder..."

"Hey guys!" It was Billings, panting, out of breath. His pallor, already pale at normal times, was the colour of a gravestone, and his left hand was fumbling with the handle of his gun on his belt. "T there's somethin' huge...movin' around in the pond!"

Rawlins sneered at the rookie, his teeth clenched in an effort to be sensitive to his colleague who, as far as he could tell, was likely going to have a few funerals to attend with his family, though he hoped against it for Joe's sake. "Billings, I don't know what you're going on about, but can't you see how Sergeant Poole is feeling? This is...may...be bad, and you keep pushing? I think you need to get back out there with your T.O. before—"

"I'm not kidding, I swear! It's...it's the size of a freakin' Volkswagen!" The rookie tried desperately to consume more oxygen without gasping. "I don't know...where Kern is...he..."

"What? We're not at a scout campout, Billings. Don't need any stupid tales right now."

Billings didn't reply, his eyes widening and his face set in a stony expression of fright as his brain unconsciously counted the number in their group. "Not enough..." he whimpered, looking down at his gun. "Can't...I'm—We...we gotta call for backup!" Before the others could react, the rookie had disappeared around the outside of the house, headed for one of the cars' radios.

The other three looked at each other, confounded. After a moment, Phelps spoke. "Like you said, Sarge: just what in hell is goin' on?"

"Billings, I can understand being a jackass...but Kern?"

"Don't worry, Sarge. We'll figure out what happened here," Phelps reassured, eying Joe. "We'll find Wayne and your nephews."

"We will," Rawlins confirmed.

"I hope so," Joe said, his confidence wavering. He hoped the boys were okay. He even hoped that his drunkard brother was all right, but that feeling he just couldn't shake that something was off—it had returned in spades. It slithered cold and scaly down his chest, coiled around his lungs. "Come on—Phelps, you go get Billings, find out what's going on. Make sure one of you calls forensics, and get a detective down here; gotta treat it as a crime scene, I guess. Rawlins and I will head to the pond, find Kern."

"I dunno what Billings is tryin' to pull, but I'm fed up with his crap." Phelps stepped carefully around the floor and bolted around the house.

“Wayne and the boys are okay,” Rawlins said as he and Joe followed suit, moving outside and toward the trees, their pace increasing to a run, though Joe couldn’t tell who exactly the officer was trying to convince. As they neared the tree line, Rawlins asked, “This sound like...what’d you say...that you and Wayne called it, Sarge...a fish story?”

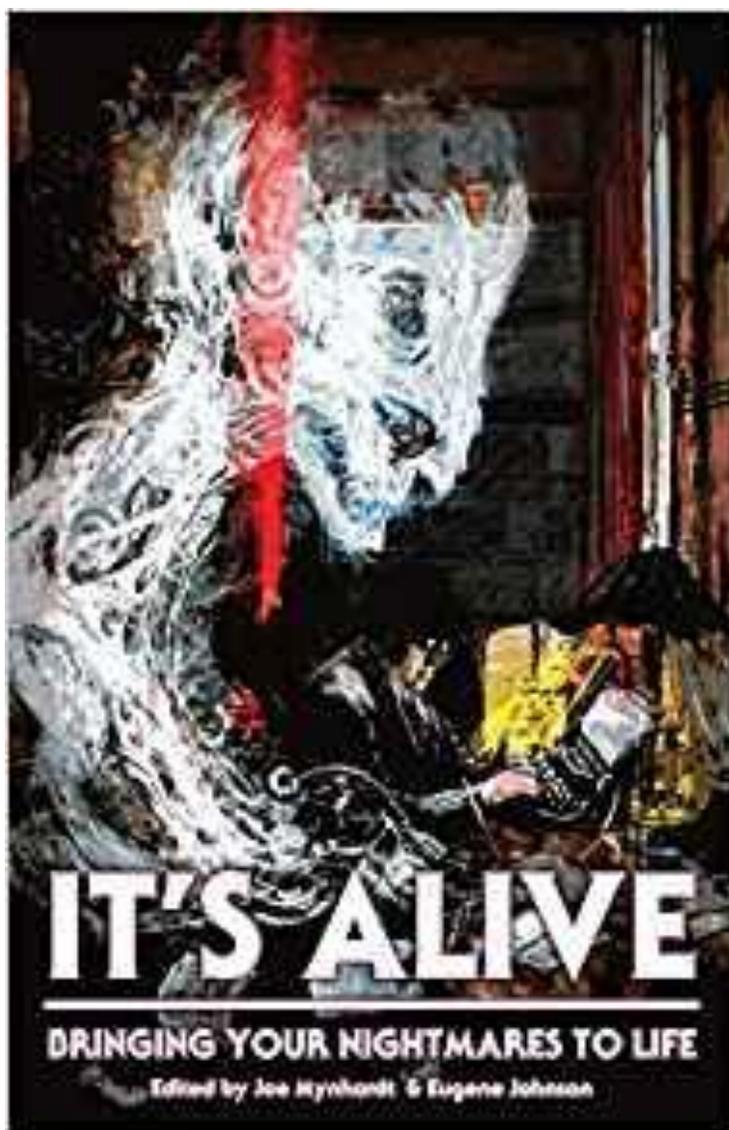
Sergeant Poole didn’t answer, the feeling snaking down into his bowels. He didn’t know for sure now, but he hoped it was. He hoped that the missing teenagers, Tommy and Billy, and even Wayne were all alive. He hoped that there wasn’t bone in the residue in the cars and at the house, and that if it was bone, it was non-human like the residue itself. He hoped that there was an explanation for the goddamn residue, for that matter. Apparently, unlike what he had witnessed his brother become, he was a man full of hope.

Through the trees, Joe could see the water of the pond rippling and splashing, something disturbing the liquid with violent motions. His sprint slowed, and he reached for his holster.

Full of hope, but low on faith.

Joe hoped this was just another fish story. He really did.

THE END



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THE TWEEDLES by Rob Bliss

Buford and Dolf Tweedle dragged the alien corpse out of the back field, shooing away the German Shepherds that whined and licked their salivating jaws. Though the grey alien was tiny, three feet tall at the most, it was heavy. Sweat soaking their John Deere caps, the brothers hooked an arm each under the alien's shoulders and dragged its small feet through grass and dirt. Its spaceship had broken up and burned in descent through the Earth's atmosphere, and was a scattering of thin pieces of dull silver metal. A scar cut the farm's back property, starting in a field of dead corn stalks and ending in a copse of trees.

The brothers wrenched open the double doors of the storm shelter that led into the root cellar, dragged the alien's heels down broken wooden steps, and closed the doors to shut out the dogs. Dolf twitched a chain that sparked a single bulb to muted light covered in dust and cobwebs. Buford set up two sawhorses and put rotted planks across them. The brothers hoisted the alien onto its bed.

Naked and grey, two washboards of ribs, knees and elbows that bent the wrong way, no genitals, large oval black eyes, one of them pierced and leaking brown fluid. The alien's head was three times larger than its scrunched face.

The brothers snapped their caps off and wiped hairy forearms across foreheads.

"Sumbitch."

"Sumbitch."

"We got ourselves an alien."

"What we gonna do with it? Bury it?"

Buford scratched his unshaven jaw. "Nah, we'll sell it. Or take pictures and sell those to one a those newspapers."

"That'll bring TV folk here." Dolt twisted his cap in greasy hands. "Or worse—the gummint."

Buford's eyes rose to his brother's stare. "Shit. Never thoughta that. The gummint. They'll cover it up and call us crazy. Take our alien and who knows what all?"

"Kill us maybe. They can do that. They make the laws so they break 'em too. We can't die, Buf. This here alien's gonna get us killed."

"Shut it. We just gotta think. Maybe no one saw or heard it crash."

"The dogs are goin' ape shit."

"We'll say they're howlin' at bears. And that a meteor fell. We'll bury the alien way back in the

field.”

“You seen the big old cut this thing made across the corn and into the trees.”

“So? Shut it. That’s nothing. We was digging a trench.” Buford jabbed a finger at his brother.  
“Don’t you go talkin’. Specially to Brenda Jane. You put that goddamn baby in her.”

“I didn’t—you did.”

“Like hell I did. I know which hole to squirt in.”

“Which one? They all make babies.”

“You’re so goddamn stupid. Ain’t daddy learn you nothing?”

“Daddy died in a moonshine jar and mama dove in after him. Couldn’t understand a thing they ever said half the time.”

“Babies only come outa one hole, you ijit. I was born five minutes afore you, that I know. You’ll do anything Brenda Jane tells you just ‘cuz her name is BJ.”

“Ain’t true!”

“Is!”

“Hell, she’s banged half of Scutter’s Craw, could be anyone. I ain’t nobody’s daddy.”

“You’re goin’ to church this Sunday and ask Jesus to get that baby outa BJ’s women parts. He’ll do it if you mean it.”

“I’ll mean it. You come too. Just to be safe.”

The dogs scratched at the doors, noses snuffling, yipping and whining.

“Scooter! Skitch! Shut it out there!”

“This here alien’s starting to stink. Let’s get it back outside, bury it quick. Or we give it to the dogs. They’ll eat the evidence in case the gummint do come.”

Buford nodded, turned his head and pressed a thumb against a nostril to blow out a missile.

“Okay. You take the dogs inside first.”

The thin grey skin of the alien’s head rolled. The brothers jerked backwards out of the bulb’s light. A bulge like a tennis ball rose on the head and moved from left to right.

“What the hell?” Dolf whispered.

Buford glanced around the dirt floor and brought up a rusted screwdriver. Leaned towards the body and poked the head. Pressed the flat top of the tool against the alien's temple, pressed in with greater and greater force.

The head cracked open down the centre and splayed wide. A noxious mist rose from the wound and choked the brothers. The screwdriver slipped to the dirt floor. The brothers held sleeves over their mouths and waved away the mist.

A baby alien was curled up in a flesh and cartilage cradle between the splayed flaps of head skin. Its black eyes opened and its tiny three fingered hands reached out.

Toward Dolf.

“Jesus fucking Christ!”

“Shut it! No blaspheme in front of the young'un. Ain't mama taught you shit?”

“Babies ain't supposed ta birth from there!”

“He's reaching up to you,” Buford said, smiling up at his brother's fear. “Well go on, pick him up.”

“He ain't mine.”

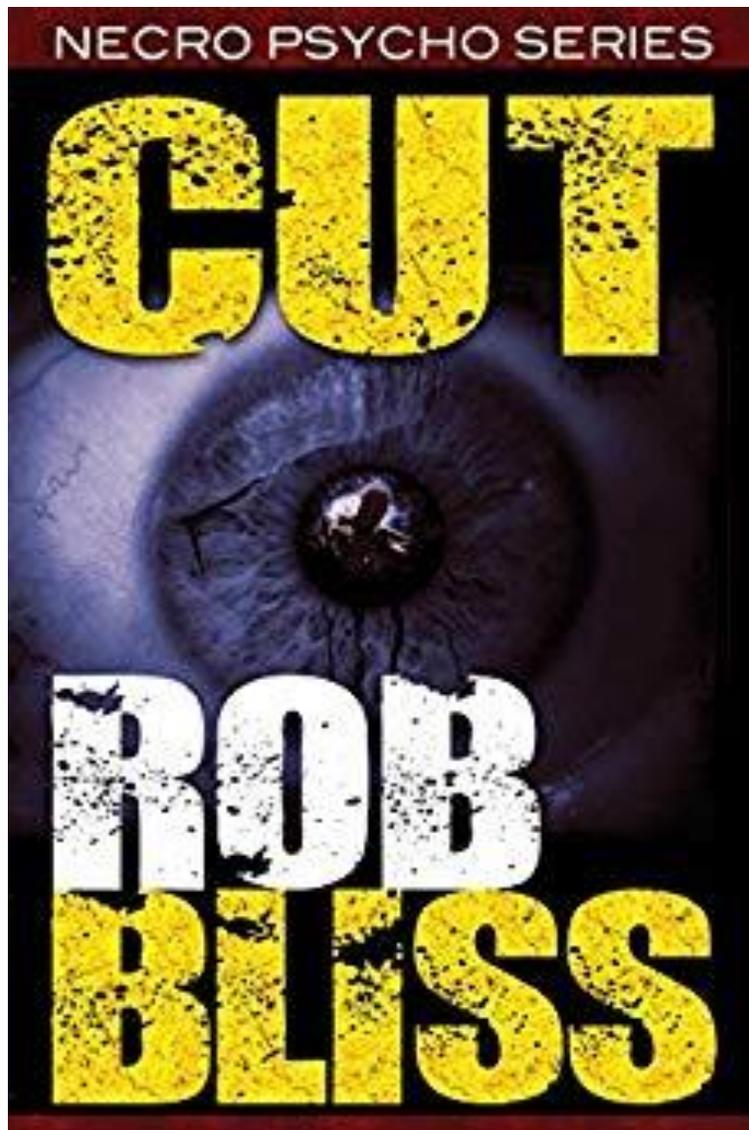
“Sure he is. You heard the crash, told me you was heading out to the field to inspect. He's yours, brother. You's a daddy. Twice over, I reckon.”

Dolf's hands delicately removed the baby from the cradle, blue viscous fluid dripping off the tiny grey body, and held it in his arms. Saw his reflection in the wide, black, oval eyes.

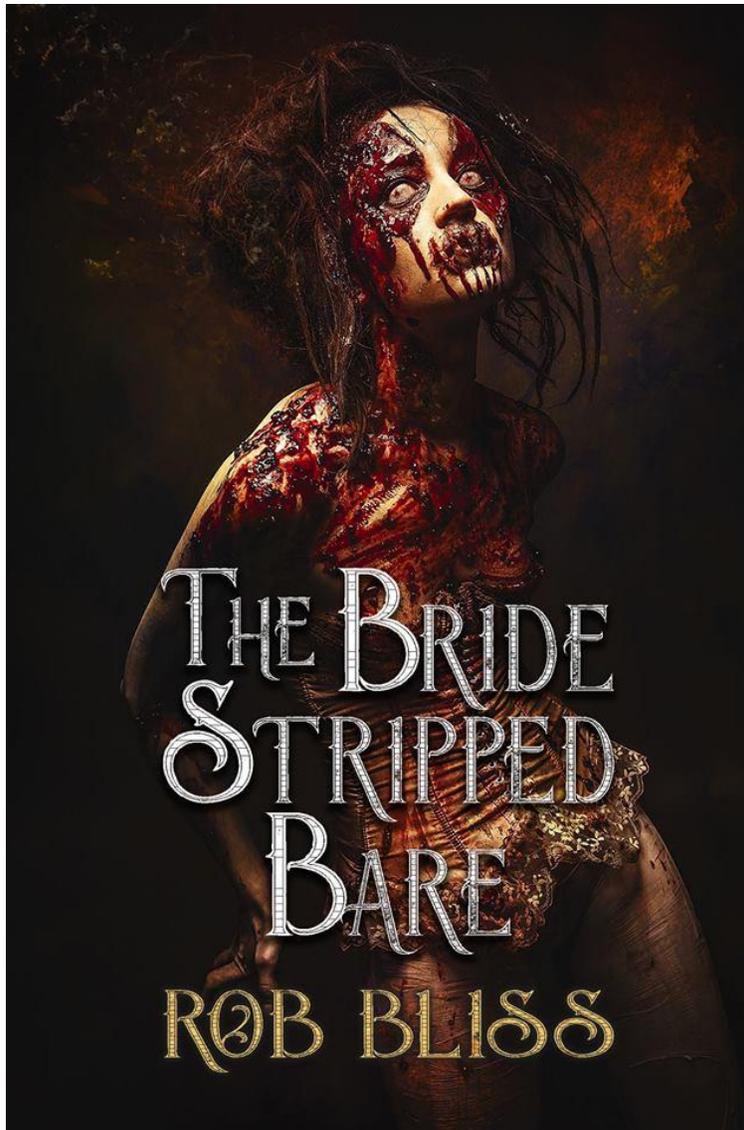
“Well I'll be. Looks jest like me. I reckon I am a daddy. Sumbitch.”

THE END

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## THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

### Part Forty Nine

So these conversations with Illara opened up new worlds for Dimara. Illara, for her part, was surprised, and delighted, to find in Dimara an intelligent quasi human, one with a dry wit that matched her own. Since Ward had decided to give Dimara the form of a human female, Dimara was, quite naturally, most interested in learning as much about human females as she could.

The files, programs, published articles and books she studied gave her vast amounts of information on this endlessly fascinating subject. But however detailed or vivid the archived data may have been, it was all two dimensional. It lacked the `heart'—as Dimara once described it to Illara—that Dimara craved.

So Dimara sought from Illara the inner workings of the human female, the heart of what it is to be a woman. This gave Illara many opportunities to while away an occasional hour or two in happy girl talk.

Lieutenant Hardy, for his part, used the opportunity to get better acquainted with Mud. The two men knew each other, but not particularly well. Mud had provided escort to the “Bellerophon”, along with Ward, on one of its journeys to Callisto. Despite his dissolute appearance, Mud made a good impression on Hardy and on Colonel Westland, commander of the mission.

Hardy had also fought at the Battle for Callisto some time later. And there, he witnessed the devastating fighting team Mud and Ward made together. This devastation was most especially apparent during those insane moments when the two men forced their ships down upon the landing bay of Turhan Mot's ship, the “Grand Marquis”, destroying it, and nearly destroying the ship itself.

And much of that which Hardy had observed of Mud, Mud had come also to appreciate in Hardy. Their differences, it proved, were shallow. Matters of taste, and not much else. Otherwise, both men were skilled and dedicated fighters, both were intelligent and well educated—though the education might not be immediately apparent in Mud's case, a clever piece of camouflage for him.

The man who called himself Rat was forced by the circumstances to keep very much to himself. By temperament a secretive and dishonest man, he had no more desire to keep company with Mud and the others than they had of him.

But Mud would not let Rat run around freely and alone on his ship. Nor would he take the trouble to make Rat a prisoner. So Mud showed Rat that every cabin, every walkway, and every compartment of his ship was closely surveilled with both video and audio tracking. Mud made it very clear that Rat had no hope of stirring up any mischief on the “Charon”.

And with that knowledge firmly implanted in Rat's mind, Mud was willing to allow Rat to move freely around his ship. Rat used his time on board the “Charon” smoking freely from Mud's

stash, and drinking from the wide range of beers and wines offered by the menu on Mud's replicator.

So it was that the pursuit of Turhan Mot was conducted in a manner most satisfactory to all.

"Emily? Emily? Are you with me? Can you hear? Everybody is waiting for you to wake up. And then we can all be together again. Won't that be wonderful? Your father is at work now, he's always in meetings with Colonel Bridgemont and Colonel Westland., when he's not here, talking to you. And Jeffrey is at Callisto now. He's helping to clean up the streets after that terrible, terrible battle.

"We all take our turns, cleaning up Callisto. And rebuilding it, too. Years and years. We'll be at it for years and years. That's maybe one good thing to come out of all this... there's plenty of work. Jeffrey will never be out of a job here, as long as he lives... you know he comes here every time he's not working... you must have heard him talking to you. Didn't you? And your father..."

"Mrs. Talbot? Joyce? How are you doing this evening?"

"Oh, doctor. I'm doing as well as I can, under all the circumstances."

"It's always good to see you talking to Emily. Talking to patients such as Emily has proven to have a most efficacious effect."

Joan gave Doctor Stanley a sad smile.

"I talk to her because I love her. If it heals her, too, then all the better."

"Of course," Doctor Stanley replied. A slender man in what would have been his early sixties, were he living on Earth, he had taken a special interest in Emily, and indeed the entire Talbot family. He had often shared Joyce's vigil over her daughter.

"Have you noted any change in her, Joyce?" he asked.

"Sometimes I almost think I can see her eyelids flutter, but I can't be sure."

"Oh?"

"Well, it's just so very subtle when it does happen, I can't be sure if I really saw what I saw, or if my eyes are playing tricks on me," Joyce said.

"Mm," was Doctor Stanley's monosyllabic reply. He examined several of the instruments connected to Emily.

“And how is Story?” Stanley asked. “I haven’t seen him in some time.”

“Oh, he’s working closely with Colonel Bridgemont. They’re analysing the battle, you know. Trying understand how it happened. For that many ships to attack us must mean they have a base nearby, maybe two or three, that we don’t know about.”

“I see,” said Doctor Stanley. “And have they drawn any conclusions?”

“Only tentative so far. I don’t know much about it. Story doesn’t talk about it very much.”

Joyce touched Emily’s forehead with her fingertips, pushing a few strands of hair away from her eyes.

“No, of course not,” Doctor Stanley said. Then, changing the subject, he offered, “May I buy you a cup of coffee?”

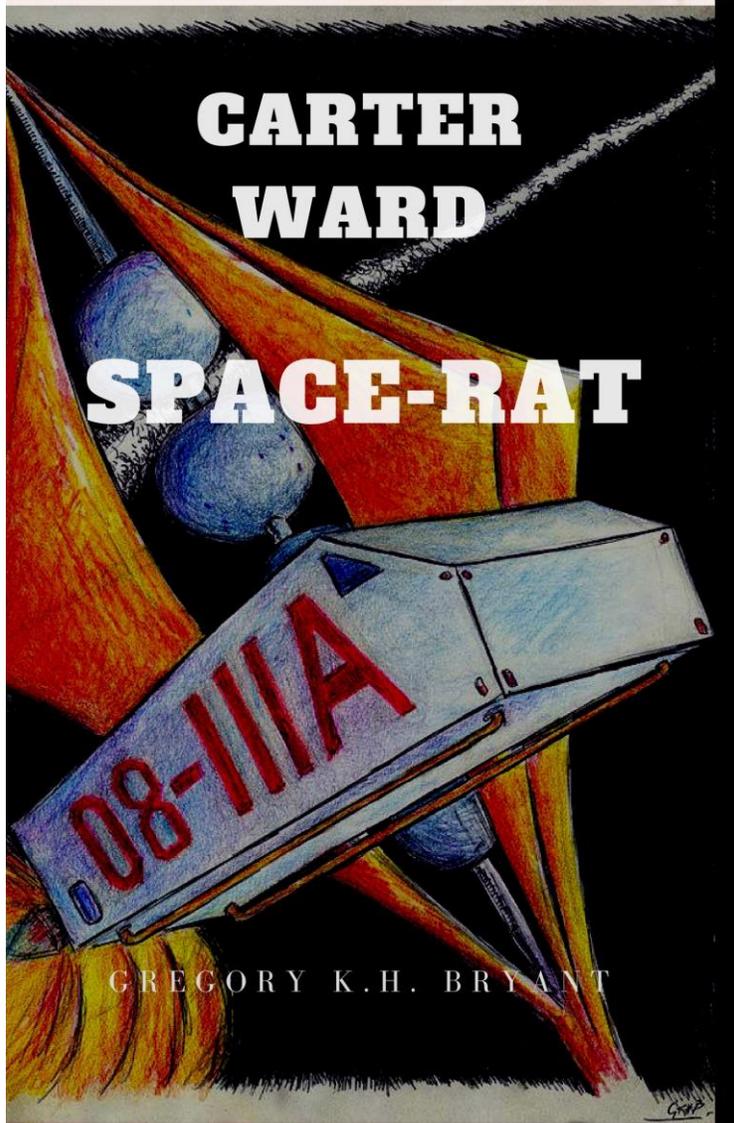
Joyce looked up from the uncomfortable plastic chair from where she was holding her vigil for Emily. She smiled.

“Why, yes,” she answered. “I would like that.”

“I’ll be right back,” he said.

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

Now available from Schlock! Publications: *Carter Ward—Space Rat* by Gregory KH Bryant.



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ERIC BRIGHTEYES by H Rider Haggard

IX: How Swanhild Dealt With Gudruda

Now Jon, Eric's thrall, watched all night on Mosfell, but saw nothing except the light of Whitefire as it smote the Baresark's head from his shoulders. He stayed there till daylight, much afraid; then, making sure that Eric was slain, Jon rode hard and fast for Middalhof, whither he came at evening.

Gudruda was watching by the women's door. She strained her eyes towards Mosfell to catch the light gleaming on Eric's golden helm, and presently it gleamed indeed, white not red.

"See," said Swanhild at her side, "Eric comes!"

"Not Eric, but his thrall," answered Gudruda, "to tell us that Eric is sped."

They waited in silence while Jon galloped towards them.

"What news of Brighteyes?" cried Swanhild.

"Little need to ask," said Gudruda, "look at his face."

Now Jon told his tale and Gudruda listened, clinging to the door post. But Swanhild cursed him for a coward, so that he shrank before her eyes.

Gudruda turned and walked into the hall and her face was like the face of death. Men saw her, and Asmund asked why she wore so strange a mien. Then Gudruda sang this song:

"Up to Mosfell, battle eager,  
Rode helmed Brighteyen to the fray.  
Back from Mosfell, battle shunning.  
Slunk yon coward thrall I ween.  
Now shall maid Gudruda never  
Know a husband's dear embrace;  
Widowed is she—sunk in sorrow,  
Eric treads Valhalla's halls!"

And with this she walked from the stead, looking neither to the right nor to the left.

"Let the maid be," said Atli the Earl. "Grief fares best alone. But my heart is sore for Eric. It should go ill with that Baresark if I might get a grip of him."

"That I will have before summer is gone," said Asmund, for the death of Eric seemed to him the worst of sorrows.

Gudruda walked far, and, crossing Laxà by the stepping stones, climbed Stonefell till she came

to the head of Golden Falls, for, like a stricken thing, she desired to be alone in her grief. But Swanhild saw her and followed, coming on her as she sat watching the water thunder down the mighty cleft. Presently Swanhild's shadow fell athwart her, and Gudruda looked up.

“What wouldst thou with me, Swanhild?” she asked. “Art thou come to mock my grief?”

“Nay, foster sister, for then I must mock my own. I come to mix my tears with thine. See, we loved Eric, thou and I, and Eric is dead. Let our hate be buried in his grave, whence neither may draw him back.”

Gudruda looked upon her coldly, for nothing could stir her now.

“Get thee gone,” she said. “Weep thine own tears and leave me to weep mine. Not with thee will I mourn Eric.”

Swanhild frowned and bit her lip. “I will not come to thee with words of peace a second time, my rival,” she said. “Eric is dead, but my hate that was born of Eric's love for thee lives on and grows, and its flower shall be thy death, Gudruda!”

“Now that Brighteyes is dead, I would fain follow on his path: so, if thou listest, throw the gates wide,” Gudruda answered, and heeded her no more.

Swanhild went, but not far. On the further side of a knoll of grass she flung herself to earth and grieved as her fierce heart might. She shed no tears, but sat silently, looking with empty eyes adown the past, and onward to the future, and finding no good therein.

But Gudruda wept as the weight of her loss pressed in upon her—wept heavy silent tears and cried in her heart to Eric who was gone—cried to death to come upon her and bring her sleep or Eric.

So she sat and so she grieved till, quite outworn with sorrow, sleep stole upon her and she dreamed. Gudruda dreamed that she was dead and that she sat nigh to the golden door that is in Odin's house at Valhalla, by which the warriors pass and repass for ever. There she sat from age to age, listening to the thunder of ten thousand thousand tramping feet, and watching the fierce faces of the chosen as they marched out in armies to do battle in the meads. And as she sat, at length a one eyed man, clad in gleaming garments, drew near and spoke to her. He was glorious to look on, and old, and she knew him for Odin the Allfather.

“Whom seekest thou, maid Gudruda?” he asked, and the voice he spoke with was the voice of waters.

“I seek Eric Brighteyes,” she answered, “who passed hither a thousand years ago, and for love of whom I am heart broken.”

“Eric Brighteyes, Thorgrimur's son?” quoth Odin. “I know him well; no brisker warrior enters at

Valhalla's doors, and none shall do more service at the coming of grey wolf Fenrir. [<sup>1</sup>] Pass on and leave him to his glory and his God."

Then, in her dream, she wept sore, and prayed of Odin by the name of Freya that he would give Eric to her for a little space.

"What wilt thou pay, then, maid Gudruda?" said Odin.

"My life," she answered.

"Good," he said; "for a night Eric shall be thine. Then die, and let thy death be his cause of death." And Odin sang this song:

"Now, corse choosing Daughters, hearken  
To the dread Allfather's word:  
When the gale of spears' breath gathers  
Count not Eric midst the slain,  
Till Brighteyen once hath slumbered,  
Wedded, at Gudruda's side—  
Then, Maidens, scream your battle call;  
Whelmed with foes, let Eric fall!"

And Gudruda awoke, but in her ears the mighty waters still seemed to speak with Odin's voice, saying:

"Then, Maidens, scream your battle call;  
Whelmed with foes, let Eric fall!"

She awoke from that fey sleep, and looked upwards, and lo! before her, with shattered shield and all besmeared with war's red rain, stood gold helmed Eric. There he stood, great and beautiful to see, and she looked on him trembling and amazed.

"Is it indeed thou, Eric, or is it yet my dream?" she said.

"I am no dream, surely," said Eric; "but why lookest thou thus on me, Gudruda?"

She rose slowly. "Methought," she said, "methought that thou wast dead at the hand of Skallagrim." And with a great cry she fell into his arms and lay there sobbing.

It was a sweet sight thus to see Gudruda the Fair, her head of gold pillowed on Eric's war stained byrnie, her dark eyes afloat with tears of joy; but not so thought Swanhild, watching. She shook in jealous rage, then crept away, and hid herself where she could see no more, lest she should be smitten with madness.

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<sup>1</sup> The foe destined to bring destruction on the Norse gods.

“Whence camest thou? ah! whence camest thou?” said Gudruda. “I thought thee dead, my love; but now I dreamed that I prayed Odin, and he spared thee to me for a little.”

“Well, and that he hath, though hardly,” and he told her all that had happened, and how, as he rode with Skallagrim, who yet sat yonder on his horse, he caught sight of a woman seated on the grass and knew the colour of the cloak.

Then Gudruda kissed him for very joy, and they were happy each with each—for of all things that are sweet on earth, there is nothing more sweet than this: to find him we loved, and thought dead and cold, alive and at our side.

And so they talked and were very glad with the gladness of youth and love, till Eric said he must on to Middalhof before the light failed, for he could not come on horseback the way that Gudruda took, but must ride round the shoulder of the hill; and, moreover, he was spent with toil and hunger, and Skallagrim grew weary of waiting.

“Go!” said Gudruda; “I will be there presently!”

So he kissed her and went, and Swanhild saw the kiss and saw him go.

“Well, lord,” said Skallagrim, “hast thou had thy fill of kissing?”

“Not altogether,” answered Eric.

They rode a while in silence.

“I thought the maid seemed very fair!” said Skallagrim.

“There are women less favoured, Skallagrim.”

“Rich bait for mighty fish!” said Skallagrim. “This I tell thee: that, strive as thou mayest against thy fate, that maid will be thy bane and mine also.”

“Things foredoomed will happen,” said Eric; “but if thou fearest a maid, the cure is easy: depart from my company.”

“Who was the other?” asked the Baresark—“she who crept and peered, listened, then crept back again, hid her face in her hands, and talked with a grey wolf that came to her like a dog?”

“That must have been Swanhild,” said Eric, “but I did not see her. Ever does she hide like a rat in the thatch, and as for the wolf, he must be her Familiar; for, like Groa, her mother, Swanhild plays much with witchcraft. Now I will away back to Gudruda, for my heart misdoubts me of this matter. Stay thou here till I come, Lambstail!” And Eric turns and gallops back to the head of Goldfoss.

When Eric left her, Gudruda drew yet nearer to the edge of the mighty falls, and seated herself

on their very brink. Her breast was full of joy, and there she sat and let the splendour of the night and the greatness of the rushing sounds sink into her heart. Yonder shone the setting sun, poised, as it were, on Westman's distant peaks, and here sped the waters, and by that path Eric had come back to her. Yea, and there on Sheep saddle was the road that he had trod down Goldfoss; and but now he had slain one Baresark and won another to be his thrall, and they two alone had smitten the company of Ospakar, and come thence with honour and but little harmed. Surely no such man as Eric had ever lived—none so fair and strong and tender; and she was right happy in his love! She stretched out her arms towards him whom but an hour gone she had thought dead, but who had lived to come back to her with honour, and blessed his beloved name, and laughed aloud in her joyousness of heart, calling:

“Eric! Eric!”

But Swanhild, creeping behind her, did not laugh. She heard Gudruda's voice and guessed Gudruda's gladness, and jealousy arose within her and rent her. Should this fair rival like to take her joy from her?

“Grey Wolf, Grey Wolf! what sayest thou?”

See, now, if Gudruda were gone, if she rolled a corpse into those boiling waters, Eric might yet be hers; or, if he was not hers, yet Gudruda's he could never be.

“Grey Wolf, Grey Wolf! what is thy counsel?”

Right on the brink of the great gulf sat Gudruda. One stroke and all would be ended. Eric had gone; there was no eye to see—none save the Grey Wolf's; there was no tongue to tell the deed that might be done. Who could call her to account? The Gods! Who were the Gods? What were the Gods? Were they not dreams? There were no Gods save the Gods of Evil—the Gods she knew and communed with.

“Grey Wolf, Grey Wolf! what is thy rede?”

There sat Gudruda, laughing in the triumph of her joy, with the sunset glow shining on her beauty, and there, behind her, Swanhild crept—crept like a fox upon his sleeping prey.

Now she is there—

“I hear thee, Grey Wolf! Back to my breast, Grey Wolf!”

Surely Gudruda heard something? She half turned her head, then again fell to calling aloud to the waters:

“Eric! beloved Eric!—ah! is there ever a light like the light of thine eyes—is there ever a joy like the joy of thy kiss?”

Swanhild heard, and her springs of mercy froze. Hate and fury entered into her. She rose upon

her knees and gathered up her strength:

“Seek, then, thy joy in Goldfoss,” she cried aloud, and with all her force she thrust.

Gudruda fell a fathom or more, then, with a cry, she clutched wildly at a little ledge of rock, and hung there, her feet resting on the shelving bank. Thirty fathoms down swirled and poured and rolled the waters of the Golden Falls. A fathom above, red in the red light of evening, lowered the pitiless face of Swanhild. Gudruda looked beneath her and saw. Pale with agony she looked up and saw, but she said naught.

“Let go, my rival; let go!” cried Swanhild: “there is none to help thee, and none to tell thy tale. Let go, I say, and seek thy marriage bed in Goldfoss!”

But Gudruda clung on and gazed upwards with white face and piteous eyes.

“What! art thou so fain of a moment’s life?” said Swanhild. “Then I will save thee from thyself, for it must be ill to suffer thus!” and she ran to seek a rock. Now she finds one and, staggering beneath its weight to the brink of the gulf, peers over. Still Gudruda hangs. Space yawns beneath her, the waters roar in her ears, the red sky glows above. She sees Swanhild come and shrieks aloud.

Eric is there, though Swanhild hears him not, for the sound of his horse’s galloping feet is lost in the roar of waters. But that cry comes to his ears, he sees the poised rock, and all grows clear to him. He leaps from his horse, and even as she looses the stone, clutches Swanhild’s kirtle and hurls her back. The rock bounds sideways and presently is lost in the waters.

Eric looks over. He sees Gudruda’s white face gleaming in the gloom. Down he leaps upon the ledge, though this is no easy thing.

“Hold fast! I come; hold fast!” he cries.

“I can no more,” gasps Gudruda, and one hand slips.

Eric grasps the rock and, stretching downward, grips her wrist; just as her hold loosens he grips it, and she swings loose, her weight hanging on his arm.

Now he must needs lift her up and that with one hand, for the ledge is narrow and he dare not loose his hold of the rock above. She swings over the great gulf and she is senseless as one dead. He gathers all his mighty strength and lifts. His feet slip a little, then catch, and once more Gudruda swings. The sweat bursts out upon his forehead and his blood drums through him. Now it must be, or not at all. Again he lifts and his muscles strain and crack, and she lies beside him on the narrow ledge!

All is not yet done. The brink of the cleft is the height of a man above him. There he must lay her, for he may not leave her to find aid, lest she should wake and roll into the chasm. Loosing his hold of the cliff, he turns, facing the rock, and, bending over Gudruda, twists his hands in her

kirtle below the breast and above the knee. Then once more Eric puts out his might and draws her up to the level of his breast, and rests. Again with all his force he lifts her above the crest of his helm and throws her forward, so that now she lies upon the brink of the great cliff. He almost falls backward at the effort, but, clutching the rock, he saves himself, and with a struggle gains her side, and lies there, panting like a wearied hound of chase.

Of all trials of strength that ever were put upon his might, Eric was wont to say, this lifting of Gudruda was the greatest; for she was no light woman, and there was little to stand on and almost nothing to cling to.

Presently Brighteyes rose and peered at Gudruda through the gloom. She still swooned. Then he gazed about him—but Swanhild, the witchgirl, was gone.

Then he took Gudruda in his arms, and, leading the horse, stumbled through the darkness, calling on Skallagrim. The Baresark answered, and presently his large form was seen looming in the gloom.

Eric told his tale in few words.

“The ways of womankind are evil,” said Skallagrim; “but of all the deeds that I have known done at their hands, this is the worst. It had been well to hurl the wolf witch from the cliff.”

“Ay, well,” said Eric; “but that song must yet be sung.”

Now dimly lighted of the rising moon by turns they bore Gudruda down the mountain side, till at length, utterly fordone, they saw the fires of Middalhof.

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## THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

### Chapter XXIX: The Shaping of the Shining One

We reached what I knew to be Lakla's own boudoir, if I may so call it. Smaller than any of the other chambers of the domed castle in which we had been, its intimacy was revealed not only by its faint fragrance but by its high mirrors of polished silver and various oddly wrought articles of the feminine toilet that lay here and there; things I afterward knew to be the work of the artisans of the Akka—and no mean metal workers were they. One of the window slits dropped almost to the floor, and at its base was a wide, comfortably cushioned seat commanding a view of the bridge and of the cavern ledge. To this the handmaiden beckoned us; sank upon it, drew Larry down beside her and motioned me to sit close to him.

“Now this,” she said, “is what the Silent Ones have commanded me to tell you two: To you Larry, that knowing you may weigh all things in your mind and answer as your spirit bids you a question that the Three will ask—and what that is I know not,” she murmured, “and I, they say, must answer, too—and it—frightens me!”

The great golden eyes widened; darkened with dread; she sighed, shook her head impatiently.

“Not like us, and never like us,” she spoke low, wonderingly, “the Silent Ones say were they. Nor were those from which they sprang like those from which we have come. Ancient, ancient beyond thought are the Taithu, the race of the Silent Ones. Far, far below this place where now we sit, close to earth heart itself were they born; and there they dwelt for time upon time, laya upon laya upon laya—with others, not like them, some of which have vanished time upon time ago, others that still dwell—below—in their—cradle.

“It is hard”—she hesitated—”hard to tell this—that slips through my mind—because I know so little that even as the Three told it to me it passed from me for lack of place to stand upon,” she went on, quaintly. “Something there was of time when earth and sun were but cold mists in the—the heavens—something of these mists drawing together, whirling, whirling, faster and faster—drawing as they whirled more and more of the mists—growing larger, growing warm—forming at last into the globes they are, with others spinning around the sun—something of regions within this globe where vast fire was prisoned and bursting forth tore and rent the young orb—of one such bursting forth that sent what you call moon flying out to company us and left behind those spaces whence we now dwell—and of—of life particles that here and there below grew into the race of the Silent Ones, and those others—but not the Akka which, like you, they say came from above—and all this I do not understand—do you, Goodwin?” she appealed to me.

I nodded—for what she had related so fragmentarily was in reality an excellent approach to the Chamberlain Moulton theory of a coalescing nebula contracting into the sun and its planets.

Astonishing was the recognition of this theory. Even more so was the reference to the life particles, the idea of Arrhenius, the great Swede, of life starting on earth through the dropping of minute, life spores, propelled through space by the driving power of light and, encountering favourable environment here, developing through the vast ages into man and every other living

thing we know.[<sup>2</sup>]

Nor was it incredible that in the ancient nebula that was the matrix of our solar system similar, or rather dissimilar, particles in all but the subtle essence we call life, might have become entangled and, resisting every cataclysm as they had resisted the absolute zero of outer space, found in these caverned spaces their proper environment to develop into the race of the Silent Ones and—only they could tell what else!

“They say,” the handmaiden’s voice was surer, “they say that in their—cradle—near earth’s heart they grew; grew untroubled by the turmoil and disorder which flayed the surface of this globe. And they say it was a place of light and that strength came to them from earth heart—strength greater than you and those from which you sprang ever derived from sun.

“At last, ancient, ancient beyond all thought, they say again, was this time—they began to know, to—to—realize—themselves. And wisdom came ever more swiftly. Up from their cradle, because they did not wish to dwell longer with those—others—they came and found this place.

“When all the face of earth was covered with waters in which lived only tiny, hungry things that knew naught save hunger and its satisfaction, they had attained wisdom that enabled them to make paths such as we have just travelled and to look out upon those waters! And laya upon laya thereafter, time upon time, they went upon the paths and watched the flood recede; saw great bare flats of steaming ooze appear on which crawled and splashed larger things which had grown from the tiny hungry ones; watched the flats rise higher and higher and green life begin to clothe them; saw mountains uplift and vanish.

“Ever the green life waxed and the things which crept and crawled grew greater and took ever different forms; until at last came a time when the steaming mists lightened and the things which had begun as little more than tiny hungry mouths were huge and monstrous, so huge that the tallest of my Akka would not have reached the knee of the smallest of them.

“But in none of these, in none, was there—realization—of themselves, say the Three; naught but hunger driving, always driving them to still its crying.

“So for time upon time the race of the Silent Ones took the paths no more, placing aside the half thought that they had of making their way to earth face even as they had made their way from beside earth heart. They turned wholly to the seeking of wisdom—and after other time on time they attained that which killed even the faintest shadow of the half thought. For they crept far within the mysteries of life and death, they mastered the illusion of space, they lifted the veils of creation and of its twin destruction, and they stripped the covering from the flaming jewel of truth—but when they had crept within those mysteries they bid me tell you, Goodwin, they found ever other mysteries veiling the way; and after they had uncovered the jewel of truth they

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<sup>2</sup> Professor Svante August Arrhenius, in his *Worlds in the Making*—the conception that life is universally diffused, constantly emitted from all habitable worlds in the form of spores which traverse space for years and ages, the majority being ultimately destroyed by the heat of some blazing star, but some few finding a resting place on globes which have reached the habitable stage.—W. T. G.

found it to be a gem of infinite facets and therefore not wholly to be read before eternity's unthinkable end!

“And for this they were glad—because now throughout eternity might they and theirs pursue knowledge over ways illimitable.

“They conquered light—light that sprang at their bidding from the nothingness that gives birth to all things and in which lie all things that are, have been and shall be; light that streamed through their bodies cleansing them of all dross; light that was food and drink; light that carried their vision afar or bore to them images out of space opening many windows through which they gazed down upon life on thousands upon thousands of the rushing worlds; light that was the flame of life itself and in which they bathed, ever renewing their own. They set radiant lamps within the stones, and of black light they wove the sheltering shadows and the shadows that slay.

“Arose from this people those Three—the Silent Ones. They led them all in wisdom so that in the Three grew—pride. And the Three built them this place in which we sit and set the Portal in its place and withdrew from their kind to go alone into the mysteries and to map alone the facets of Truth Jewel.

“Then there came the ancestors of the—Akka; not as they are now, and glowing but faintly within them the spark of—self-realization. And the Taithu seeing this spark did not slay them. But they took the ancient, long untrodden paths and looked forth once more upon earth face. Now on the land were vast forests and a chaos of green life. On the shores things scaled and fanged, fought and devoured each other, and in the green life moved bodies great and small that slew and ran from those that would slay.

“They searched for the passage through which the Akka had come and closed it. Then the Three took them and brought them here; and taught them and blew upon the spark until it burned ever stronger and in time they became much as they are now—my Akka.

“The Three took counsel after this and said— ‘We have strengthened life in these until it has become articulate; shall we not create life?’” Again she hesitated, her eyes rapt, dreaming. “The Three are speaking,” she murmured. “They have my tongue—”

And certainly, with an ease and rapidity as though she were but a voice through which minds far more facile, more powerful poured their thoughts, she spoke.

“Yea,” the golden voice was vibrant. “We said that what we would create should be of the spirit of life itself, speaking to us with the tongues of the far flung stars, of the winds, of the waters, and of all upon and within these. Upon that universal matrix of matter, that mother of all things that you name the ether, we laboured. Think not that her wondrous fertility is limited by what ye see on earth or what has been on earth from its beginning. Infinite, infinite are the forms the mother bears and countless are the energies that are part of her.

“By our wisdom we had fashioned many windows out of our abode and through them we stared into the faces of myriads of worlds, and upon them all were the children of ether even as the

worlds themselves were her children.

“Watching we learned, and learning we formed that ye term the Dweller, which those without name—the Shining One. Within the Universal Mother we shaped it, to be a voice to tell us her secrets, a lamp to go before us lighting the mysteries. Out of the ether we fashioned it, giving it the soul of light that still ye know not nor perhaps ever may know, and with the essence of life that ye saw blossoming deep in the abyss and that is the pulse of earth heart we filled it. And we wrought with pain and with love, with yearning and with scorching pride and from our travail came the Shining One—our child!

“There is an energy beyond and above ether, a purposeful, sentient force that laps like an ocean the furthest flung star, that transfuses all that ether bears, that sees and speaks and feels in us and in you, that is incorporate in beast and bird and reptile, in tree and grass and all living things, that sleeps in rock and stone, that finds sparkling tongue in jewel and star and in all dwellers within the firmament. And this ye call consciousness!

“We crowned the Shining One with the seven orbs of light which are the channels between it and the sentience we sought to make articulate, the portals through which flow its currents and so flowing, become choate, vocal, self realizant within our child.

“But as we shaped, there passed some of the essence of our pride; in giving will we had given power, perforce, to exercise that will for good or for evil, to speak or to be silent, to tell us what we wished of that which poured into it through the seven orbs or to withhold that knowledge itself; and in forging it from the immortal energies we had endowed it with their indifference; open to all consciousness it held within it the pole of utter joy and the pole of utter woe with all the arc that lies between; all the ecstasies of the countless worlds and suns and all their sorrows; all that ye symbolize as gods and all ye symbolize as devils—not negating each other, for there is no such thing as negation, but holding them together, balancing them, encompassing them, pole upon pole!”

So this was the explanation of the entwined emotions of joy and terror that had changed so appallingly Throckmartin’s face and the faces of all the Dweller’s slaves!

The handmaiden’s eyes grew bright, alert, again; the brooding passed from her face; the golden voice that had been so deep found its own familiar pitch.

“I listened while the Three spoke to you,” she said. “Now the shaping of the Shining One had been a long, long travail and time had flown over the outer world laya upon laya. For a space the Shining One was content to dwell here; to be fed with the foods of light: to open the eyes of the Three to mystery upon mystery and to read for them facet after facet of the gem of truth. Yet as the tides of consciousness flowed through it they left behind shadowings and echoes of their burdens; and the Shining One grew stronger, always stronger of itself within itself. Its will strengthened and now not always was it the will of the Three; and the pride that was woven in the making of it waxed, while the love for them that its creators had set within it waned.

“Not ignorant were the Taithu of the work of the Three. First there were a few, then more and

more who coveted the Shining One and who would have had the Three share with them the knowledge it drew in for them. But the Silent Ones in their pride, would not.

“There came a time when its will was now all its own, and it rebelled, turning its gaze to the wider spaces beyond the Portal, offering itself to the many there who would serve it; tiring of the Three, their control and their abode.

“Now the Shining One has its limitations, even as we. Over water it can pass, through air and through fire; but pass it cannot, through rock or metal. So it sent a message—how I know not—to the Taithu who desired it, whispering to them the secret of the Portal. And when the time was ripe they opened the Portal and the Shining One passed through it to them; nor would it return to the Three though they commanded, and when they would have forced it they found that it had hived and hidden a knowledge that they could not overcome.

“Yet by their arts the Three could have shattered the seven shining orbs; but they would not because—they loved, it!

“Those to whom it had gone built for it that place I have shown you, and they bowed to it and drew wisdom from it. And ever they turned more and more from the ways in which the Taithu had walked—for it seemed that which came to the Shining One through the seven orbs had less and less of good and more and more of the power you call evil. Knowledge it gave and understanding, yes; but not that which, clear and serene, lights the paths of right wisdom; rather were they flares pointing the dark roads that lead to—to the ultimate evil!

“Not all of the race of the Three followed the counsel of the Shining One. There were many, many, who would have none of it nor of its power. So were the Taithu split; and to this place where there had been none, came hatred, fear and suspicion. Those who pursued the ancient ways went to the Three and pleaded with them to destroy their work—and they would not, for still they loved it.

“Stronger grew the Dweller and less and less did it lay before its worshippers—for now so they had become—the fruits of its knowledge; and it grew—restless—turning its gaze upon earth face even as it had turned it from the Three. It whispered to the Taithu to take again the paths and look out upon the world. Lo! above them was a great fertile land on which dwelt an unfamiliar race, skilled in arts, seeking and finding wisdom—mankind! Mighty builders were they; vast were their cities and huge their temples of stone.

“They called their lands Muria and they worshipped a god Thanaroa whom they imagined to be the maker of all things, dwelling far away. They worshipped as closer gods, not indifferent but to be prayed to and to be propitiated, the moon and the sun. Two kings they had, each with his council and his court. One was high priest to the moon and the other high priest to the sun.

“The mass of this people were black haired, but the sun king and his nobles were ruddy with hair like mine; and the moon king and his followers were like Yolara—or Lugal. And this, the Three say, Goodwin, came about because for time upon time the law had been that whenever a ruddy haired or ashen tressed child was born of the black haired it became dedicated at once to either

sun god or moon god, later wedding and bearing children only to their own kind. Until at last from the black haired came no more of the light locked ones, but the ruddy ones, being stronger, still arose from them.”

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