



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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 12, ISSUE 28
1ST APRIL 2018

THE ROBOT VERSUS THE AZTEC WEREWOLF

BY NEAL PRIVETT
— *"GIVE US THE
ROBOT!"*

PAYBACK

BY GERALD E
SHEAGREN—
*"YOU CAN'T
KILL SOMEONE
WHO'S
ALREADY
DEAD."*

THE THIEF OF TIME BY DAVE LUDFORD

PET TOPIARY

BY JAMES
RHODES

WWW.SCHLOCK.CO.UK

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by
Gavin Chappell

PUBLISHED BY:
Schlock! Publications
(www.schlock.co.uk)

Schlock! Webzine

Copyright © 2018 by Gavin Chappell, C Priest Brumley, Steve Laker, Neal Privett, Gerald E Sheagren, Dave Ludford, Gregory KH Bryant, Percy Greg, HG Wells

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 12, Issue 28

1st April 2018

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

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

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

Any other enquiries, including requests to advertise in our quarterly printed magazine, also to editor@schlock.co.uk The stories, articles and illustrations contained in this webzine are copyright © to the respective authors and illustrators, unless in the public domain.

Schlock! Webzine and its editor accept no liability for views expressed or statements made by contributors to the magazine.

This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *VarnaDragons* by [Grantscharoff](#). Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

EDITORIAL

[THE ROBOT VERSUS THE AZTEC WEREWOLF](#) by Neal Privett—*Ernie stuck his gun against the scientist's temple and smiled. "Give us the robot!"* SCIENCE FICTION

[PAYBACK](#) by Gerald E Sheagren—*"You can't kill someone who's already dead."* HORROR

[THE THIEF OF TIME](#) by Dave Ludford—*We both married the wrong people...* HORROR

[VOYAGER IN THE DARK](#) by Steve Laker—*"Anywhere in mind?" the mother computer enquired...* SCIENCE FICTION

[PET TOPIARY](#) by James Rhodes—*Metamorphoses...* FANTASY

[THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE](#) Part Six by Gregory KH Bryant—*Turhan Mot took the rebuke in silence...* SPACE OPERA

[ACROSS THE ZODIAC](#) Chapter Twelve by Percy Greg—*On the River...* PLANETARY ROMANCE

[THE WAR OF THE WORLDS](#) Book One: Chapter Seventeen by HG Wells—*The "Thunder Child"*. SCIENCE FICTION CLASSIC

EDITORIAL

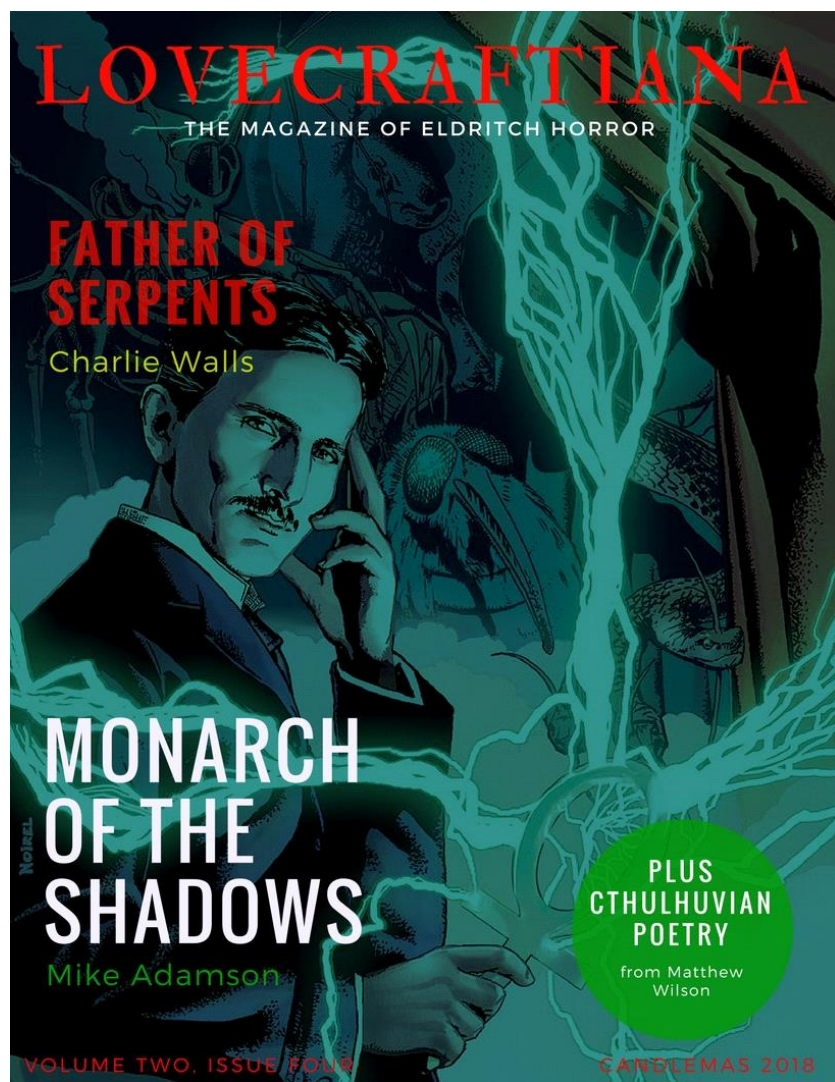
This week out in the Mexican desert two gangsters attempt to steal an experimental robot. A 'grieving husband' reenounters his wife down in the basement. A procrastinator feels regret when he visits his one-time lover's grave. Milu travels the universe in her dreamship. And the death of a young boy's prize goldfish results in something truly magical.

Meanwhile, out in space, Horst Dal cross-examines Turhan Mot. On Mars the journey continues down the river. And on Earth, the Martians continue to attack the escaping humans.

And a very merry Easter / April Fool's Day / Passover to all our readers. See you next week for Schlock's seventh anniversary, which will feature the final instalment in Stephen Hernandez' *Nazi Lesbian Vampire* saga! But we're still accepting stories...

—Gavin Chappell

Available from Rogue Planet Press: the Candlemas 2018 edition of [Lovecraftiana—the Magazine of Eldritch Horror](#).



[Return to Contents](#)

THE ROBOT VERSUS THE AZTEC WEREWOLF by Neal Privett

“Wanna pick up that hitchhiker?”

“No time, man. We gotta get to the professor’s place in the canyon.”

Ernie Roberts pushed the fedora back on his head and sucked the last ounce of smoke from his dangling cigarette. He shot an uninterested glance in the direction of the lone man on the highway with the extended thumb. The guy looked as if he had thumbed a thousand rides. His shoulders stooped with the world weariness that only the homeless know. His face was dark and emotionless, and he seemed as much a part of the desert as the rattlesnake crossing the highway, the buzzards circling overhead, and the boulders and scrub along the roadside.

The hitcher was clad in the uniform of the worker, faded khaki, a sweat stained work shirt, a wide brimmed hat to keep the sun from blistering his eyes. He draped a second-hand sport coat across his shoulder and stood like an ancient statue beside a clump of mesquite. His eyes followed the truck as it shot past. Ernie frowned. There was something strange about that man. What was he doing way out in the middle of the desert on such a blistering day?

The figure faded quickly in the sweltering haze. Ernie looked back until the man was completely gone, then he relaxed and leaned back in the seat. “Yeah, okay.” Roberts loosened his tie and took a handkerchief from his coat pocket. He wiped the sweat from his glistening brow. “God...it must be 120 degrees out here today!”

The driver grinned, displaying two gold teeth. “It’s alright. Mexicans are used ta the heat anyhow. He won’t melt.”

Ernie shook his head. “He might, Chief. Anyone would.”

Another moment passed, and the lonely road began to twist and turn among scrub covered hills and crags that showed no sign of human presence. “Why does the Doc live way out here for?”

“Ah, you know them scientific guys. They like to be way out in the middle of nowhere, so they can experiment and not have to worry about people.”

Ernie shook his head. “Not me, Chief. Give me Los Angeles any day. That’s the place to be.”

“Yeah? Well you ain’t a scientist, are you, Ernesto?”

“No, but if I was, I wouldn’t live way the hell out here.”

A house appeared suddenly like a waiting ghost up ahead. A ranch style, partially hidden by the rocky, mesquite ridden hill that rushed upwards to meet the deep pastel sky. Chief grinned.

“There it is.”

They parked the truck in the shadows and scurried to the back door. Ernie took a hairpin from his coat pocket and in mere seconds, the lock was picked and the two determined gangsters were inside the back hallway. The corridor was dark, with the exception of a light glowing behind a closed door at the end.

They moved stealthily down the hallway, with guns drawn and ready. Chief paused as he grasped the doorknob and with a deep breath, he flung the door open, much to the surprise of the elderly scientist sitting at a large oak desk inside the room.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“Shut up, old man,” Chief snarled. “And maybe you won’t get hurt.”

“What do you want?”

“I think you know, Pops. We have an interested third party that wants your little invention.” Chief nodded at Ernie and the thin man grabbed the scientist.

Ernie stuck his gun against the scientist’s temple and smiled. “Give us the robot!”

The elderly man stiffened. “The...the robot? But you can’t...”

“Where is it? Don’t make us get rough, Pops,” Chief said as he moved closer, the butt of his gun held high.

The scientist sighed in defeat and the weight of his body collapsed into the chair. “It’s in the next room.”

“And the control panel?”

The scientist gestured at a table in the corner of the room. Chief walked over and removed a black panel filled with buttons and levers. He strapped it to his arm and moved towards the adjacent room. Though Chief had seen just about everything in his violent life, he was not prepared for the sight that greeted him in the half-lit room beyond the door. A mechanical beast towered over him, looming like a giant in a half-remembered childhood fairy tale. The thing was huge: eight or nine feet tall and made of solid steel that shimmered in the light. It was humanoid, but a strange otherworldliness draped its powerful frame, sending uncomfortable shivers up and down Chief’s quivering spinal cord.

“Damnation,” he whispered.

It stood in terrible silence against the far wall, staring blankly into the nothingness that would surely vanish as soon as the switch was thrown on the control panel. Chief surveyed the bone crushing hands that hung rigidly by the robot’s sides. It looked as if it could bend and twist the toughest steel into splinters with those hands. And there were the eyes: empty caverns devoid of

any light. It was waiting, this monster...waiting for the switch to be thrown and the darkness to call for it. Left to the kindly old scientist, the machine would be an instrument of good, a boon to mankind. But in the hands of the underworld, this creature of metal and wire would be the deadliest weapon in the history of organized crime. Nothing or nobody would ever get in their way again. They would be the kings of the earth.

A darkened portal adorned the robot's wide chest, waiting for the switch to be thrown that would shoot its wires and circuits full of life. Chief had no moral qualms about his boss's plans for the metal beast. It would be sent to rob, murder, and create all manner of mayhem on the streets of Los Angeles. The robot would pummel the foundations of the city until its fathers surrendered completely. But despite the criminal possibilities of this beast, a cold chill hovered over the gangster. Something was ...unholy about the thing. Beating some punk down with fists or club, sticking him with a shiv, even filling a son of a bitch that deserved it full of hot lead, was something...all part of gangland business. But this was something else altogether. Chief was amazed to find himself searching his heart for some semblance of right in what he was about to unleash on the world.

His finger began to sweat on the control panel. His mind raced and quivered at the thought of what would happen the second he pulled that switch. It was the unknown that gave him pause.

The temporary heaviness of Chief's thoughts was lifted by the sound of Ernie's voice in the next room. "Chief? Everything alright in there?"

"Yeah. I'm about to turn this pile of bolts on."

"What are we gonna do about the doc?"

"I think you know," Chief grimaced and without another hesitation, he threw the switch on the control panel. His forearm tingled for a second as an unknown energy raced through the wires of the panel. A red light appeared suddenly in the robot's dead eyes and a mammoth spark of Frankensteinian creation shot through its wiring and gears. A metallic groan came from deep within the cavern of its frame. The same red glow that radiated from its eyes raced across the glass portal in its chest and a steady ticking noise, the machine-like mockery of a heartbeat, filled the room.

Chief raised his forearm and turned a knob to the right. He moved a lever forward and with an ear jangling crash, the mechanical monster exploded to life! It took one clumsy step forward, then another, and by the third step it had reclaimed its steadiness. The aged professor gasped in the next room and went limp in Ernie's arms. "Oh, god," the scientist whispered in shocked bursts of pained breath. The cold steel of the gangster's gun burned into his side. The realization of what he had unleashed into the world tore through his mind like a runaway bullet. He had created a man...for good...for the benefit of humankind...and his creation had been hijacked and made an instrument of evil. It was more than he could process. "What have you done?"

Chief wielded the control panel as if it were an extension of his flesh. His reservations quickly faded as he felt the immense power he now controlled surging through his mind and body. "I can

do anything,” he whispered. “Anything!” Visions of rival bosses kneeling in defeat and wild women swooning breathlessly filled his quivering brain, along with Olympian visions of money and gold overflowing, bets made on horse races and dice rolled on green tables with no fear of losing. Atlantic City...Vegas...Monte Carlo...he would bet like nobody ever had before and rake home the winnings. He would rule...and nobody would oppose him...because he had this deadly automaton at his fingertips now. A thousand pounds of bone crushing metal at his command, ready to strike in the night!

The gangster laughed, a dry humourless cackle from the sewer pit of his spirit. He turned the knob on the control panel and aimed the killer robot towards the door. The mechanized creature’s head ripped through the wood and plaster of the door frame. It did not slow down but moved rapidly across the floor of the adjoining room where Ernie held the professor at gunpoint. The confident smirk on Ernie’s face quickly faded into a mask of pure fear. Chief’s partner waited for him to pull a lever and make the robot halt in its tracks before it reached them, but for some reason it kept coming.

“Chief! What...what are you doin’? Make it stop!” Ernie screamed, his eyes wide with terror. “Stop!”

The professor smirked. “You fool! Your partner is possessed with the robot’s power. He will never listen. We are both dead men.”

The robot sent the desk flying across the room and leaned into Ernie’s face. It loomed, studying the panic that erupted from him. It drank deep of his terror, of the adrenaline tinged pool that formed on his brain. The last animalistic thoughts of a man about to die a terrible death. Chief laughed and twisted another knob. The robot’s massive arms shot upwards like electrical currents and seized Ernie by the neck. The last thing Ernie saw was those glowing red eyes, unfeeling and colder than a winter in Hell.

The monster lifted him into the air and shook him like a rat until the breath left his body and the bones of his neck crackled and snapped. The robot’s hands squeezed tighter and tighter, cutting into the dead man’s flesh like the claws of a crab. Blood began to slowly spurt from the crushed arteries, rolling in crimson lines down the throat and over the silver glistening hands of the mechanized death machine.

The professor gasped as the head tumbled from Ernie’s corpse, revealing a bloody stump that protruded from his coat and shirt collar. The elderly scientist, reeling in shock, almost collapsed, but caught himself on the desk before he went down. “Sweet mother of God,” he moaned. The room spun out of control for a second, but the professor remained conscious. The last thing he saw as the mist from his eyes cleared was the gleaming silver metal of his robot’s face and the pulsating red glow of its unfeeling eyes.

Esmeralda’s sat on a back street, a couple of blocks off Sunset.

That's not true. The dive was on the far side of a rundown section of North Hollywood, behind a cut-rate Chinese restaurant and a strip joint that had closed down a year earlier. The sign was still up in the girlie club but nothing went on in there any more except the proliferation of cockroaches and some shady deals by individuals skilled in picking locks. The side alleyway was peopled with winos and derelicts and the doorways were cluttered with overflowing garbage cans with fat green flies that buzzed in the early morning sun like emeralds with wings.

The Blue Angel sat at a back table with a worn red velvet table cloth that was decorated with a decade and a half of unidentifiable stains.

The Blue Angel!

With way too many years on his ring-worn body.

The Blue Angel!

A forlorn son of Time, whose once well-developed physique was now turning a little paunchy and creaky.

The Blue Angel!

Who still wore his mask and cape and sat alone at a quiet table reliving his glory days over and over as he swam down a river of tequila and cried himself to sleep once he stumbled home from Esmerelda's to collapse into his second-hand bed to escape the dawn.

The ghosts of yesterday hovered about the room: late night conversations, laughter, and curses floated on the stale air. Mariachi music played on the jukebox. One of the Mexican cooks sang along with the tune from the kitchen. Angel sat and stared at a half empty bottle of Mexican tequila. He adjusted his mask and poured another shot.

It didn't help.

The memory-haunted luchador sat there with his back against the wall, dreaming of Mexico City and the excited cheers of the packed house that had once danced in his ears, but had now faded into the mists with the passing of years. The fans cheered no more. Once the Angel was a masked hero. Now he was just a mask. And the cold drifting away of decades remained a monument to that fact.

"Drinking with the ghosts again, Angel?" The voice interrupted the luchador's thoughts. He glanced up and saw the bartender hovering over his table.

"Que pasa, Tony? You know me. I drink with ghosts every night."

"Go home, Angel. Get some sleep."

"Only thing I got to do at home is talk to the walls." The Blue Angel rose slowly and placed a

few wadded-up dollar bills on the table beside the bottle.

“Keep it, Angel,” the bartender said, his voice tinged with pity. “On the house.”

“Allow me that one dignity, Tony,” the Angel said as he adjusted his mask. “To pay for my own drinks.”

The Angel walked out slowly, painfully, like a piece of old machinery that needed oiling. Tony watched him go, his heart filled with images of the old country and better days sitting ringside. But those visions weren’t pleasant right now. They burned. Like acid.

“Who’s that creep?” One of the drunks at the bar stood there, wobbling, with a sardonic sneer plastered across his dirty face. Tony instantly wanted to punch him, to shatter that cruel grin into a million shards.

“It’s the Blue Nacho,” another lush spouted, proud of his own wit.

“Shut up,” Tony said as he moved back towards the bar. “And I’m cutting you both off...so beat it!”

There was a full moon.

The silver light bathed everything...from the streets of Los Angeles to the shadow haunted desert that rolled on in cool silence all the way to the far mountains and beyond. Chief lit another cigarette and pulled his coat tighter about his body. There was a strange chill coming from the shadows, an otherworldly feeling that he didn’t like. He couldn’t get back to Los Angeles quick enough.

He raised the back door of the white delivery truck parked behind the scientist’s house and pulled the ramps down. The mechanical beast left bloody footprints as it moved slowly up the ramps. Chief chuckled to himself. That was his partner’s red. Poor Ernie. He wasn’t such a bad guy. But things were going to be different now, and Ernie was no longer needed. Chief was going to be in charge. Just one little visit to the boss and he would be the big man in charge. The rest of the city would come later. His heart beat rapidly, as visions of all the possibilities raced through his brain.

Chief directed the robot to sit on a stack of boxes, then he flipped the switch of the control panel and pulled the door down, latching it. He took a long drag and flicked his cigarette into the scrub and climbed in; destination: the big city. The engine sprang to life with a roar and the gears creaked as the truck moved, weighed down with the awesome half-ton might of the metal man inside.

The bodies wouldn’t be found for weeks, maybe longer. By then, Chief would be boss of his gang...with enough power to muscle out the other organizations and make them work for him.

He would control all the racketeering and vice in the city. And that would only be the start. Nobody would be able to stand up against him.

Nobody.

Chief pushed the delivery truck across the desert, through that world of extremes: midnight phantoms and slithering Gila monsters...sun beaten stones and venomous tarantulas.... pure unadulterated loneliness and slicing moonlight. This was no place for humans, out there. Chief pushed on, dreaming of what was to come...dreaming of the city lights that would appear on the horizon in a couple of hours.

He was brain-deep into his ambitious reverie when something appeared out of the night and raced across the two-lane highway in front of him. It was a dark blur, moving faster than anything he had ever seen before. It leaped into the air, hurling itself high over the cab. It flew like a bat over the front of the truck, reeling through space towards the windshield. Whatever it was came to rest upon the hood of the truck and dug with its hands. Its fingers pressed into the white paint and slowly ripped into the hood as the thing attempted to hold on. Chief couldn't believe his eyes its fingers vanished beneath the metal and flecks of white paint flew away into the wind like snow. Then came the deafening and impossible sound of metal creaking and ripping that assaulted his ears. It looked like a man. But it was no man. The road...the night seemed to vanish as that terrible face pressed against the windshield...a face that screamed like a thousand demons boiling to perfection in Hell's hottest cauldron! Cruel red eyes, devoid of anything other than pure raw instinct burned into his. The beast opened its mouth and glistening white fangs protruded. They nearly glowed in the moonlight. Great strings of foamy saliva blew from its lips, as if being pulled away like string. Chief panicked; white-hot blasts of fear struck him deep in the grey matter. He swerved back and forth and trying to regain control of the truck.

But the steering wheel spun out of control in his hands. The truck hopped the asphalt and crashed across the sand and rock. The last thing the terrified gangster saw was a splintering Joshua tree as it came through the windshield.

The thing vanished just before the wreck.

It launched itself from the truck's cab on steel coiled legs and sailed out of sight over the back. The pain hit just as soon as Chief opened his eyes. He was pinned to the seat by jagged splinters of wood. Part of the tree penetrated his left shoulder. It was a large piece. This wasn't good. The bone had shattered. The flesh was ripped. He could feel his heart trying to beat despite being pushed out of place. Chief tried to breath, but it took every ounce of his strength and when his lungs moved, sharp pains tore through his quivering body. He lay his head back on the seat and closed his eyes. He could taste the blood in his mouth.

Salty.

Hot.

Almost metallic. Liquid rust.

All of a sudden there came a low growl...inexplicable and heart stopping...like something out of a childhood fairy tale when the shadows gathered around the bedside and a child regretted hearing the stories that followed him to his waiting slumber...or maybe it was like something out of a pulp horror magazine, a shudder inducing slice of dread that dripped with bloody saliva and bared its fangs on the newsstand!

It was an almost cautious sound, as if a hunting animal waited in the darkness, strategically trying to determine whether its prey was sufficiently crippled before it moved in for the kill. Chief detected a sense of victory in the growl; primeval...savage!

Something caught Chief's attention all of a sudden and he jerked his head to the right. The quick motion caused lightning bolts of pain to race through his torso, lacerating his nerve ends and giving his pain voice. He cried out and tried to calm himself. But he froze when he noticed the yellow eyes glowing just outside the shattered window. Something crouched close by and studied him from a distance. The low growling sound came again.

Whatever it was waited, kept space between them. Was it waiting for him to die? Or was it toying with him, enjoying his final breaths that emanated from deep within his mutilated, agonized body? "Get a good...good...look, you son of a bitch," Chief moaned. "You got me, pal. I...I'm dyin'!"

The beast growled louder and its eyes glowed more intensely with bloodlust. Foam appeared around the edges of its black lips, pooling and dripping in anticipation of fresh meat. A new kill!

It moved closer, crouching close to the ground. Like an animal. But its torso...its face and hands...were human in appearance.

"What...what...are you?"

The creature moved closer to Chief, yet it did not seem to be moving at all. It almost flowed. Like some kind of crazy dream. A nightmare. Chief blinked and its head was inside the truck cab. Covered in brown fur. With fangs, white as ivory, jutting from its mouth. And saliva dripping like a faucet from its lips. The thing almost purred. A joyful light burned deep in its yellow pupils. Its nostrils flared, sniffing the air. It smelled Chief and it wanted his blood...his flesh!

But the gangster wasn't one to give up the ghost without creating a couple of more to go along with him for the final cosmic ride into eternity. His hand slid down his side and his fingers touched the cool metal of the control panel still strapped to his arm.

"Ain't gonna...get me...you damned dirty...monster...!"

With one flick of the switch, there came a stirring in the back of the wrecked truck. The wolf

man heard and stiffened. Its nose lifted into the air and the beast listened intently. Suddenly, the prey before it mattered not. Something was wrong. A loud crash came from out of the night and the unmistakable sound of metal being crushed into scrap filled the werewolf's keen ears. The sound was deafening to the werewolf, with its supernatural senses that surpassed that of even the most remarkable human. A new enemy had arrived...something from the back of the vehicle. Something big...something strong.

Chief locked the control panel into place and let it slide into the seat beside him. His eyes closed then and he released his final breath, forever oblivious to the Titan's battle that raged in the cursed desert night.

Despite its immense mass, the death machine moved swiftly around the back of the truck. Its robotic eyes focused on its new target and it closed in for the kill with its powerful claw-like hands opening and closing in anticipation of crushing bone and flowing blood. The werewolf wasted no time...it sprang from the sand and wrapped itself around the machine's upper torso. The beast dug in with its fangs. But something was wrong. Pain shot through the wolfman's teeth. This was no normal man...this gleaming giant with glowing eyes. The werewolf's fangs did not tear...did not penetrate flesh.

Without warning, the robot sent the wolf-thing crashing into the sand where it lay stunned. The automaton moved in for the kill. It lifted its heavy metal foot high above the wolfman's throbbing skull and with every ounce of power it possessed, brought its heel hurdling downward through space. But the beast was not ready to die, and with animalistic fury, it rolled from beneath the robot's death-dealing foot and sprang airborne, right at the machine's eyes. There was a brief struggle...the two foes spun wildly in a mad circle; the robot attempting to unseat the wolfman from its shoulders and the fanged beast attempting to claw the automaton's eyes from its metallic skull.

Sparks emanated from the robot's face as the wolf drove its clawed fingers through one of the glass eyes and pulled out a sizzling mass of wires. A few more inches and the robot's brain would be exposed to damage. Images cracked and hummed in the robot's mind in an out-of-control cacophony of sound and sight. The robot stumbled forward and swung its mighty hands at the air, confused and no longer sure of its orders.

The man-made machine swayed and convulsed, trying to remove the threat to its power centre, but the werewolf held on. It raked its black claws across the robot's face and went for the other eye, but the robot finally dislodged the creature and sent it reeling across the star-scattered desert. The wolf crashed into a lone Joshua tree and did not get back up.

Smoke rose in small streams from the robot's damaged eye receptor. Unintelligible and partial commands bleeped in and out of its brain on a crash course to malfunction. The robot glanced around frantically for a master to command it. There was no one. Just a strange beast lying unconscious, or dead, at the base of a splintered tree and the silent twisted wreck of an automobile. The robot's one functioning eye glowed bright and red, filtering the jumbled and tattered images that came through from the world outside its metal shell.

There was nothing here now. The robot moved slowly down the night highway, en route to the horizon and the soft red glow of Los Angeles in the distance.

The Blue Angel emerged from the front door of Esmeralda's with his blue cape floating in the wind and the memories rushing out of the darkness to claw and bite. Visions of his 1962 film, *The Blue Angel Versus the Vampire Men of Coyoacan* came to his mind...the scene when he burst into the crypt with cape flowing and muscles bulging, ready to save the world from evil. Kids all over Mexico cheered him on. That was the beginning of his movie career. He had never felt stronger...or more loved. Some of that old spirit still held on. Like the dying embers of a once blazing fire.

With his faded glory following close behind like a dark shadow, The Blue Angel staggered forward, his destination down three blocks and turn to the right. A tiny, roach-ridden apartment; another restless night. He had barely travelled a block when he heard something in the alleyway beside the pawn shop. He stopped and listened to the late-night symphony of breaking glass and garbage cans smashing against brick walls.

Angel stopped and listened. Perhaps someone was in trouble. His voice echoed through the dark alley, blending with the old brick, overturned garbage cans, and dirt. "¿Quién es?"

No response. The luchador tried to shake the haze of cheap tequila from his head as he moved closer and turned the corner of the pawn shop. Ahead of him waited the shadow haunted alley, dimly lit by an ominous silver moon. "¿Quién es? Who's there?"

No response. He pushed the cape back on his shoulders and moved closer. "Is everything okay?"

The loud and sudden crash from an overturned garbage can caused Angel to jump and a stray cat emerged from the alley en route to more important venues in the night. "¡Dios mío!"

The nervous luchador laughed at himself...standing there in front of an alley, half drunk and frightened of a cat. "Go find yourself a big mouse, Cabron."

Another crash came from the alley, followed by a low guttural growl, the kind an animal makes when the sweet scent of fresh prey reaches its nostrils. The smile left Angel's face and he began to move away.

Something stepped from the shadows. A silhouette, with the silver razor-like gleam of moonlight dancing on the edges of what appeared to be bristling fur. The Blue Angel could only stand there, frozen to the broken sidewalk. A cold shiver came over Angel, as if someone had thrown a bucket of ice water over his head. The thing in the alley stood erect.... like a man...yet it growled like an animal and raked the air with fur covered claws!

"What...are...you?"

With a savage howl, the thing exploded from the dark alley into the streetlight. There was no mistaking it...it was a werewolf! It was impossible...yet there the creature was! Angel had fought a wolfman in a couple of his movies, but this was real. No make-up man could have created that...with its burning yellow eyes and ivory white fangs that protruded from slavering black lips! Angel kicked the beast in the chest as it charged at him, knocking it down. Then he ran.... ran as if the tequila had already left him. Ran as if the devil himself were on his trail.

The monster was fast. Like a real wolf. It sprang like lightning from the ground, unfazed, and followed in mad pursuit of its newfound prey. Blue Angel rounded the corner, with his cape flying behind him. He could hear the thing's padded feet slapping the pavement. He could feel the thing's hot breath on his neck. In the chaos of being chased by something weird and unexplainable, Blue Angel remembered one of his signature moves. He wheeled around suddenly, grabbed the surprised creature by the front of its torn shirt, and then, dropping to the ground, he flipped the beast into the air with the force of his legs. The monster flew across the sidewalk and crashed into the side of a brick building.

But it did not stay down for long.

The werewolf rose and pursued its quarry once more. It caught Angel just as he reached the front stoop of his ramshackle house and it threw every ounce of supernatural strength it could muster, slamming into the luchador and knocking him flat to the pavement, where he lay helpless amidst a sea of stars.

The werewolf stood over Angel, with claws ready to rip and tear. A low growl, dripping with triumphant and bloodlust...filled the wrestler's throbbing ears. He fought the dizziness off just enough to glance up at the thing that would surely take his life.

“¡Dios mío!” A never-ending stream of lost years swelled around Angel's face, flooding his mind and choking his breath. He was going to die...and yet he had not really lived in decades. Where had his life gone?

Angel tried to lift himself up, but it was no use. Dizziness and nausea hit every time he lifted his head. The beast had him. He was down for the count. The final count. “Uno...dos...tres,” he whispered with a pained smile.

There came a deafening sound...like garbage cans flying through the air and metal scraping across concrete melding with an inhuman growl...then the soft velvet of total blackness as The Blue Angel prepared to leave the world.

Something ripped the werewolf's attention away from its helpless prey. A giant shadow appeared from the alley, looming high above the street...standing between the moon and its salivating fur covered son. White-hot recognition burned into the beast's animal mind as it turned from the puny human lying prostrate before it and gazed deep into the cold metallic features of the killer robot, with its glowing red eye!

The cyclopean machine zeroed in on the snarling, surprised beast with its one good eye. The werewolf was immediately labelled a threat by the robot's computerized brain, which repeated the blood red command to KILL! KILL! Over and over!

Though it was an emotionless creation with no master, jarring images of the previous desert battle flew past the receptors of the man-made brain in its metal skull, causing something akin to vengeance to surge throughout its wiring and programming. Searing memories of its eye ripped from the socket...bits of flame sparking from the severed wires. The robot knew that it had to destroy the creature kneeling before it!

The metal-man raised its clawed hands and moved in for the kill. Despite its bulk, the robot moved like lightning. With Olympian power pulsating through its body, the rampaging creation of science throttled the supernatural creature before its animalistic instincts could react to the approaching danger...and with one great burst of power, sent the werewolf hurdling through space. The creature of the night crashed violently against the brick side of an abandoned warehouse.

The rage-stricken moon-child flew like a leaf in the wind and landed with a thud on the sidewalk. It lay there with a million stars exploding into resonating bursts of pain and dizziness. The wolf man tried to regain its senses, but a dark cover of semi-consciousness overtook it as the lumbering automaton moved closer. Through the haze, it could hear the death-toll of metal feet as they scraped across the sidewalk and the subsequent crunching of the death machine's weight sinking into the concrete.

The moon-beast tried to rise, but its arms shivered, then gave way and it collapsed helplessly onto the sidewalk. It could still see its enemy's outline through the haze that descended over its yellow eyes. The wolf man wanted more than anything to lunge at the metal-thing and rip into its wired throat with its gnashing fangs and scratching claws. It wanted to destroy the man-made machine that opposed it, blocking its way to the peace and serenity of the cool, moon-painted desert night. But here it lay...waiting for the killing blow that would end its earthly existence, as well as its curse. The werewolf did not fear its own slavery to blood-lust and the moon...it was the weak mortal that dwelled within. He was the one that prayed for death...not it!

The ground shook and its head throbbed with every step the robot took. The wolf man tried once again to rise and fight, but fell to the pavement with its raging blood curdling inside its monstrous veins and its fur covered head throttled with the most intense pain it had ever experienced. The beast snarled in defiance, with wolf teeth protruding past slavering black lips as giant metal hands reached down for its vulnerable neck...

All of a sudden, a dull but deafening gong! shattered the haze and darkness...the savage sound of flesh colliding with metal filled the wolfman's ears! As if plucked away by an unseen hand, the metal man vanished and, in its place, stood the masked man with the flowing blue cape. The man was like a statue, silhouetted in electric blue against the dark of the city. He stood there with his body quaking, almost as if he would fall over any second. But an immediate lightning flash of strength came from deep inside a hidden pool and the luchador known as The Blue Angel

lunged. The werewolf picked itself from the ground slowly and stared in confusion as the strange human as he dove onto the robot's back. The metal giant lay flattened and temporarily disabled in a heap of busted brick and dust, with its head and torso inside the old warehouse and its feet outside. The luchador had appeared out of nowhere and rammed the robot with his powerful downturned shoulder, sending the automaton reeling into the side of the building and crashing through the wall.

The unbridled powerhouse of a man buried his knees into the robot's back, denting the metal despite its thickness, and pulled back on its head with all of his strength. Sweat rolled down the luchador's bare chest as he wrenched and twisted the enormous head until it pulled free of the shoulders in a shower of sparks and sizzling wires that writhed and bit Angel's bare skin like angry snakes.

The luchador rose victoriously from the disabled robot and hurled the disembodied head into the far corner of the alley where it crashed into a sea of overturned garbage cans and debris. Rats scurried and darted away from the clicking, whirring head with its fading red eye as it came to rest atop a medium sized heap of trash and busted concrete blocks. In a second or two, the eye was darkened for good and the head silent as a grave. Fear was soon overcome by animal curiosity and the rats slowly emerged again, venturing out to investigate.

The Blue Angel turned to the struggling wolf man before him. The beast rose from the ground slowly; the robot already vanishing from its instinct-driven mind. Now, the only prey that it saw...the only enemy...was the strange human in the blue mask and cape before it. It growled as a long line of hot saliva dripped from its teeth.

Angel shivered, the temporary burst of courage proved to be a reflex. It felt amazing...for a moment, he had felt as if it were 1962 again and he had been back in the ring where he once found his purpose. But now, the feeling had faded back into the recesses of the past and the old despair had returned, coupled with the new terror of death that culminated in the shadowy monster looming on the sidewalk.

The Angel's voice caused the werewolf's ears to prickle and stand. "Hola...I thought I would return the favour. You saved my skin...so I saved yours. I hope that's cool, amigo..."

The wolf man crouched, ready to spring once it had determined if this human's blood was worth the trouble. Angel took a step closer with his hands outstretched...hoping that the beast took it as a gesture of peace. "I don't know what you are...but I bet you don't mean me any harm. I am no threat, man...I mean, I am like you...alone..."

The beast-man took a step backwards. This human was different...and brave. Angel shivered as a low growl filled his ears. It reminded him of a wolf man he fought in a movie once, though the title of the flick escaped him. He took a step back, too. "Hey...it's cool, amigo...I know you got problems. I bet you don't wanna be that way...a werewolf...un hombre lobo, I mean..."

The creature paused. It had not expected this. It turned its head sideways and listened. The sounds coming from the human's mouth were unintelligible, but it gleaned the meaning. The

masked man meant it no harm and for some reason, unknown to the werewolf, it lost the desire to kill...at least for a moment.

“I don’t wanna be this way...alone and all washed up. Trapped in a crazy world that I didn’t make. You feel that way, too, compadre?” The wolf lowered its tensed claws and stared at The Angel in confusion. “I mean, sometimes I don’t wanna live no more...you feel that way, too, don’t you, amigo? Like...we don’t belong nowhere...”

The werewolf took a step closer and turned its head again, straining to hear more. A tear appeared in The Angel’s eye. It rolled down the blue of his mask. It hung like a dying dream on the end of his sculptured chin. “You and me amigo...we’re both lone wolves...we used to belong, but now there’s only a thousand lonesome nights on end for us. All you got is the moon...all I got is the bottle...” The moon-beast recoiled in shock as the luchador fell to his knees there before it, with hot tears running from his eyes. It was a strange emotion...but one the wolf slowly began to recall. Sorrow...the kind that made a river of the eyes and kept a man up all night, pining for the dawn. It knew...the werewolf didn’t know how...but it knew and understood.

“You can kill me...if it will help, amigo...if it will ease some of your pain. I don’t care anymore. I can’t make it anymore...I tried, man...I tried. But I can’t. So here’s my throat...my blood. Just take me and end this life. I don’t want it no more...”

The werewolf stood there, not knowing what to do. The lust for blood was gone...it could not understand how or why. All it knew was that it felt some kind of pity for this human...and a strange feeling of alliance, too. Somehow...this masked man, choked with emotion, who offered his blood up as if it were a gift...was also a sad-eyed child of the night. The beast did not know what to do, so it turned and ran away to the waiting desert, leaving this forlorn soul to its fate.

And to the night...

The Blue Angel wept...for the first time in years. The dejection of half a lifetime poured from his body once the stops were pulled out and he wept like Heaven itself was depending on it. It was a good, soul cleansing cry. After the tears were spent and his old knees could not tolerate the pavement any longer, he rose from his unexpected confessional and headed for his apartment, flushed with the saving grace of a long overdue release. But this time, he did not go there alone.

Beating drums from times long past.

Long dead warriors raced through the tropical night, their obsidian bladed clubs held high and ready to strike enemies down. The priests raised high their blades for the sun, Tezcatlipoca, and sliced the beating hearts from a thousand sacrifices. The long-awaited return of Quetzalcoatl. The floating gardens. The songs and poems of a people.

A silver moon towered over ancient pyramids that rose high into the starry sky. Sacred moon.

Blood moon.

The fire and destruction of the Spanish. The end of an age.

The prisoner awoke. He had been dreaming again.

His heart sank when he realized that his dreams were only dreams. Of a long-ago time when he was part of a glorious empire. When he was a man. Before the curse. He looked around. His mind reeled with confusion. Where was he?

He groaned and rubbed his aching head. His head always hurt after the transformation. The nights of the moon when he suffered the torments of the damned. He was lying on a cot against the wall. Slender streaks of moonlight filtered through the bars.

He was in a jail cell.

The voices of his captors wafted in from the adjoining room. The lawmen. They had found him, as they had many times before on the cold mornings after the full moon...probably lying unconscious in a ditch somewhere. They probably thought he was a drunk. He almost wished that he was.

He strained to listen. They were talking...about him. He did not listen long. He turned his attention to the moonlight filtering into his cell. The silver light was beautiful. Hypnotic. He rose from the cot and moved closer to the window. Outside was the night. Waiting for him.

He did not try to fight the transformation this time. Let it come. Out there was the freedom of the desert and fresh prey. He closed his eyes and let the moonlight wash over him. All of a sudden, the fangs jutted from his lips and the fur began to appear on his hands. He raised his head to howl...

There came a great crash and the sound of old bricks being turned to rubble. The sheriff of the little border town rushed into the hallway with his deputy. A look of stark terror covered their faces. They had found an awful knowledge...the kind of knowledge that such things actually existed in the world. The kind of knowledge that would not allow them a good night's rest for the remainder of their lives. They stood in abject silence, surveying the scene through the bars.

The bars had been ripped from the wall, which was very old, but still solid enough that no human could have done that kind of damage. Through the gaping hole in the jail wall, they could see a figure racing at incredible speed across the desert.

They watched in disbelief until it finally vanished behind the mesquite and rocks, leaving only a spine-tingling howl as a token to the chilly night.

THE END

[Available from Rogue Planet Press](#)

WINTER 2017-18

Schlock!

Quarterly

Includes Two
Episodes of
Sword and
Planet epic
**THE CAVES
OF MARS**

PRETTY PENNY
by Kate Lowe

**RED DEMON
VERSUS THE
WORM PEOPLE**

BY NEAL PRIVETT

Plus Five More Stories and
Poems
from the thrilling pages of
Schlock! Webzine

[Return to Contents](#)

PAYBACK by Gerald E Sheagren

Brian Lassiter's eyes popped open and he sat bolt upright in bed, a cold sweat lacing his brow, his heart beating like a kettle drum. His hands were balled around his blanket.

He'd been dreaming about Vicki; just like he had every night for the past three weeks. And it was always the same. She was shambling toward him in her wedding dress, which was smeared with blood, her hands reaching out for him and a terrible mewling sound coming from her mouth.

And for some unfathomable reason, they were in the middle of the woods. Panicked, he would take flight, dodging trees, jumping over logs and thrashing through the underbrush. But it made no difference how fast he ran—she would always be up ahead, waiting for him; just like Jason Voorhees or Michael Myers in those horror movies.

Brian's eyes darted around the bedroom, as he half-expected to see a form appearing out of the darkness and moving toward the bed—a form wearing a white wedding dress. When it failed to materialize, he couldn't help releasing a long sigh of relief.

“For fuck-sake, I have to stop this craziness.”

These nightmares will end. They're just some temporary shit. It's probably just my subconscious, suffering from a little guilt.

Trying to quell his nerves, he rested his head back on the pillow; closing his eyes and thinking about events that'd occurred and would occur.

He supposed having nightmares was a small price to pay, since he was the one ultimately responsible for Vicki's death. He was the one who found, hired and paid for the man, who'd struck and killed her in a hit-and-run. There'd been no other alternative. With Vicki refusing a divorce, it was the only way he could marry Gloria.

God, he could hardly wait to propose. Gloria was a real eye-opener—tall, blonde and slender, with a dynamite body and a set of 38-C jugs. What a piece of eye candy! But they'd have to play it cool for a while, maybe months, seeing each other on the sly, as before. Appearances had to be kept up; otherwise people might begin to wonder.

The police, of course, had investigated the hit-and-run as a possible homicide. With the husband always being the prime suspect, he'd had to prove to them he was at work at the time. Plus, he paid the hitman from money he had secreted away instead of from his checking or savings account. Therefore, there'd been no suspicious withdrawal of funds. And he'd successfully answered all their other questions, often breaking down in fits of tears.

He'd kept up the act throughout the wake, church service and graveside ceremony, groaning in anguish and going through Kleenex after Kleenex. He even threw himself on the casket at the cemetery, slobbering away and calling out Vicki's name, until his parents had to pry him away.

For his brilliant portrayal of a grieving husband, torn by the tragic death of his wife, this year's Oscar for best actor goes to the talented newcomer, Brian Lassiter. What an outstanding job. Come on up her, Brian, and accept your award.

He started to laugh, just thinking of himself marching up to the stage, dressed in a tux and smiling from ear-to-ear. Some of the biggest names in Hollywood were in the audience, cheering away and giving him a standing ovation. What a hoot that would be.

The only real problem would arise is when he introduced Gloria to his parents. They'd loved and cherished Vicki. In their viewpoint there would never be a suitable replacement for her. And when his mother saw Gloria's pierced lip and the razor-wire tattoo around her arm, there was no doubt she was going to throw a whopper of a shitfit. There was no one more straitlaced than his mother.

"That's tough bee's-wax, Mom. You're going to have to grin and bear it. Gloria is going to be the next Missus Lassiter. Hey, maybe you can get a razor-wire tattoo just like hers."

Just then, as he was relishing the idea of setting his mother straight, he heard something, causing his heart to lurch. Someone had whispered his name, sounding very much like a breeze coursing through the limbs of a tree. He froze, his eyes darting around the darkened room. Then it came again—*Briiian*—prickling the shorthairs on the back of his neck, a chill creeping down the length of his spine.

"What the fuck is this shit? I'm not dreaming. I'm awake. I know damn well I'm awake."

He reached out, fumbled around and turned on the nightstand lamp. The room was empty. Nothing was out of the ordinary.

"Whew. Right now, all I need is a couple of good shots of Jack Daniels."

In nothing but his boxer shorts he swung out of bed, flipped on the hallway light and headed for the kitchen, stopping a couple of times to look over his shoulder.

This bullshit will end. By next week my nightmares and all this other nonsense will be nothing but a bad memory.

He couldn't help but chuckle.

If Gloria knew about this, she'd be laughing her ass off. I wish she was here, right now, naked as a jaybird and shoving those big boobs of hers into my face. Boy, I love to suck on those melons. Her nipples get as hard as pencil erasers.

Just thinking of her caused his dick to get hard.

"You see that, baby? You see what you do to me?"

Then he took another step and drew up short, frowning and sniffing at the air.

What the hell is that smell?

Sniffing again, it finally came to him, like a baseball alongside the head.

Holy shit—it's that perfume Vicki liked to wear! What's it called? Uh...uh...Shalimar. Yeah, yeah, that's it—Shalimar.

With goosebumps breaking out on his arms and legs, he glanced back over his shoulder then into the living room to his right. There were no strange forms or suspicious movements. Nothing was out of the ordinary. By the time he was finished the perfume smell was gone.

Man—I really need that Jack Daniels.

He hurried into the kitchen, turning on the light, got a glass from the cupboard and snatched up the whiskey bottle from the countertop. Then sitting down at the table, he poured himself a good stiff drink. Maybe he'd finish off the entire fifth. Maybe he'd drink himself into a complete stupor.

That would certainly make this crazy night a little easier to face.

And then, as the first sampling of whiskey was reaching his throat, he suddenly spotted the gold ring resting in the middle of the table, causing him to nearly choke on the liquor.

Now what? What the hell is this?

He reached out with trembling fingers and slowly picked up the ring, turning it over and over. Then on a closer inspection, he saw it, the inscription on the inside of the band—*Love is for eternity.*

Holy frigging shit—this is Vicki's wedding ring! And it was on her finger when she was buried!

Beads of sweat popped out along his brow and his heart started to pound so violently he thought it might burst. Whining in fear, he dropped the ring. It bounced twice then skittered across the table and onto the floor.

No, no, no, this can't be! This fuckin can't be!

He sat there, puffing out breaths so he wouldn't start hyperventilating. While he was doing so, if things weren't bat-ass crazy enough, the basement door suddenly creaked open on its own, the stair light coming on.

Oh, for shit-sake, I'm in the fuckin middle of a Stephen King novel! Or maybe I'm still dreaming.

It was an invitation. There was no doubt about it. The basement had been solely Vicki's space. That's where she'd done her crafts, did her sewing and knitting, and kept her doll collection. Now it was beckoning to him, offering a challenge that he couldn't shake off, couldn't ignore. Then, with his body seemingly taking over from his brain, he rose from the chair, walked over and headed down the stairs.

You could tell the basement had been Vicki's sanctum sanctorum by its womanly touches. There were frilly pillows on the two easy chairs and *Precious Moments* figurines placed all about. There was a sewing machine, yards of material, balls of yarn and knitting needles. And there, along one entire wall, on specially built shelves, was her doll collection, some of them dating back as far as the late eighteen-hundreds.

Look at all of this garbage. It's about time I started tossing it out. But maybe I can get a good price for some of those older dolls.

The thoughts had no sooner crossed his mind when one of the larger dolls, with curly blonde locks and rosy cheeks, and wearing a frilly blue dress, suddenly leaned forward, its glass eyes turning wild and its mouth moving. "You're nothing but a no-good, miserable, lying, cheating prick!"

Then another doll, wearing period clothes of the 1890s, stood up on the shelf and shook a porcelain fist. "You're going to burn in hell, you murdering, two-timing sack of shit!"

He was so unnerved his bladder nearly let loose.

I've got to get the hell out of here! This is insanity!

As he turned to make a dash for the stairs, he sucked in a startled breath and stumbled back a few steps. There, standing a few feet away was Vicki, looking just as she had in her coffin. She was even had the same smile the undertaker had so successfully managed. She was holding her favourite doll she'd been buried with.

This can't be! She looks so damn real!

"Hello, Brian. You look surprised to see me." She waved a hand toward the shelving. "You certainly got my babies all riled up."

He tried to speak but his throat was so dry he had trouble forming words. "Ah...ah...ah...ah...."

"What's the matter? Does the cat have your tongue?" Vicki's features turned hostile. "I'm surprised your bimbo isn't upstairs, so you can give her a good screwing. I knew all about your affair with her. I knew that's why you wanted the divorce."

He cleared his throat, trying to collect some saliva. "I...I...I'm sorry, Vicki. I'm so sorry for everything."

“You’re sorry, my ass. I may be dead, thanks to your bastard of a hitman, but I’m not stupid. But I do have to give you credit for one thing—your performance of a grieving husband was outstanding. You must have cried a gallon jug of tears. And when you threw yourself on my casket—it was pure genius.”

With his knees feeling as though they were about to buckle, he started to slowly side-step toward the stairs.

Vicki shook her head, clucking her tongue. “Do you think it’s going to be that easy, Brian? Do you think it’s up, up and away, and you’re out of here? Oh no, Sweetie Pie, this is payback time.”

He heard the basement door slam shut, making him jump in place.

“There’s no way you’re getting out of here.”

“We’ll see about that.”

He willed his legs into motion, hurrying across the basement and up the stairs. But no matter how hard he tried to open the door it wouldn’t budge. He began to scream and kick at it. Then he noticed something. There was smoke curling through the small space below the door, along with a reddish-pink glow flickering on the top stair. It just started to register in his brain when he felt the wave of heat.

“You know, Brian—I wished you’d decide on cremation rather than having me buried.” Vicki offered a gurgling laugh. “Because that’s the way you’re going to go.”

In desperation, he placed his hand on the doorknob to give it another try, but yelped in surprise. The knob was already hot to the touch. Cursing, he scrambled down the stairs and headed for the door that led to the backyard. But as he half-expected, it also wouldn’t budge.

I’m trapped! I’m fuckin trapped!

He could hear the crackling of flames above, and smoke began to pour in earnest beneath the stairway door, greying the basement air. It was only the matter of time before he’d start choking.

“Stop this, Vicki, stop this! I don’t want to die!”

“I didn’t want to die either. But you made sure I did. There’s my phone over there. Call nine-one-one.”

With a surge of hope, he rushed to the phone and snatched up the receiver. The line was dead.

Vicki cackled a laugh. “Surprise, surprise, surprise.”

The conflagration was spreading at a tremendous rate of speed, way faster than a normal fire. A portion of the upstairs floor caved in, burning boards dropping down, tongues of flame igniting the carpet and one of the easy chairs.

“No, no, no, help me!”

“You’re way beyond help, Brian. Ah, doesn’t that heat feel wonderful?”

“You fuckin bitch! I ought to choke the life out of you!”

“You can’t kill someone who’s already dead.”

All of the dolls began to laugh hideously and dance on the shelves, hands waving, little feet prancing. The rapidly intensifying heat began to crack their porcelain, melt their wax and withered their rubber. Moments later, embers started to land on them, igniting hair and clothing, but still they kept up with their macabre dancing, until they were completely consumed by flames.

With no place to go, nowhere to run, Brian had sought refuge in the far corner of the basement, having slipped down into a seated position with his knees hugged tightly to his chest. He watched, heart thudding away, as the carpet burned closer and closer. The floor groaned above, threatening to cave in. Overcome by smoke, his eyes watering, he began to cough and gag, the heat practically searing his skin. An ember landed on his nose and he frantically brushed it off.

I don’t want to die like this! Please, I don’t want to die like this!

Vicki came over, standing before him, her body starting to waver and flicker, as though it was about to disappear.

“You brought this on yourself, Brian. Just to let you know—I loved you dearly, right up until the very end.”

“I...I’m sorry for what I did.”

“You already said that.” Vickie looked around, giving a rueful sigh. “I sure loved this basement.”

Then her body gave one last flicker and was gone.

Brian began to cry with remorse, rocking back and forth.

Less than a minute later, just after he gagged and laboured out his last breath, the entire main floor caved in.

Vicki materialized at the edge of the woods, hugging her favourite doll and staring at the flames licking at the sky. A deer stood nearby, not moving a muscle, mesmerized by the conflagration.

“That’s quite the sight, isn’t it? Well, I have places to go and things to do. I have to pay a visit to a bitch named Gloria.”

Sirens sounded in the distance as Vicki turned and evaporated into the night.

THE END

[Cyrus Song](#)

Cyrus Song

Steve Laker

[Return to Contents](#)

THE THIEF OF TIME by Dave Ludford

Procrastination is the thief of time.

That's the trite old proverb which nevertheless is so apt and true, my darling Elizabeth, is it not? I loved you from the moment we first met. Not a proverb, that, of course, but a cliché. But again, apt and true. I wish I could have told you that I loved you through all of those long intervening years since that long-ago garden party but you are gone from me now, Elizabeth, gone from the world, decaying slowly back to dust in the cold, hard silence of the earth; the silence that is the non-music of death.

I was fifteen, you fourteen. My adolescent anger burst through my skin in clumps of livid red acne that made me feel awkward and constantly ill-at-ease when talking to people- anybody- but you said it was only natural and they would disappear in time. That's the calming effect you had on me, Elizabeth, like sipping chamomile tea. My anger faded like a distant memory in your presence. I can still recall the scent of you, lily of the valley, strong but not overpowering. I drank that scent in, savoured it, the joy of it was intoxicating. We held hands and walked away from the world of the adults, leaving them to their inane, meaningless gossip, while we explored the nearby woodland, lost in each other. We were all that mattered. Not children anymore, we had left behind childish things. Almost-adults; yes, I like that term, shyly drawn towards each other that blissful day.

"Listen, Tom!" you said as we reached the heart of the woods. "That's a robin...and yes, a wren, too. Aren't their songs just beautiful?"

My reply was a vigorous nod of the head, being lost for words, overawed by the symphony of liquid sound that seemed to be being performed just for us. A celebration, a tribute just for us. You ran around that clearing pointing at butterflies, pointing at birds. You knew them all. Overhead, the plaintive 'kee kee' sound of a buzzard, a distant speck in the sky, circling. The ominous sound, perhaps, of the ending of innocence. Oh sorry, my darling, I'm being far too fanciful, I know. Perhaps I should have written poetry.

And that day had to end sometime, as did also the glorious ones that followed, days that stretched into weeks, months. Just three days after my sixteenth birthday I was conscripted, called away to join the rumbling thunder of cannon fire and the helpless screams of men being blown apart on battlefields far from home and our beloved woods. Away from you, my darling. The adult world had claimed us both at last. You would soon be training to become a nurse, to soothe tortured minds and help fit back together the broken bodies of those twisted, disfigured and damned forever by a bloody, pointless war.

I love you, Elizabeth. There, I've said it.

Why am I able to say it now, as I look down upon your grave with the simple but beautiful epitaph? Why could I not say it back then, when it really mattered, when we shared the vital and energetic impulses of our youth? Oh, I wanted to, don't get me wrong. I wanted to a thousand times. A million. My inability to do so will haunt me for however many years I may have left;

however many I may choose myself to have left. I kept putting it off, I procrastinated; it would have made all the difference, I'm sure of it. We need to articulate our feelings before it's too late.

We both married the wrong people. You, that violent, alcoholic bully who made your life such a misery. A man who drove you to take your life by your own hand, the only way out that you could see. The only way you could achieve peace. Damn and blast that vile monster.

I got hitched to the nurse (how ironic that she shared your profession, darling) who tended my wounds at the field hospital, a shrewish nag whom I had little hesitation in disposing of after five miserable years of all that I could take from her. Cutting up her body was the hard part, but I'd seen such dreadful horrors in battle that I'd become inured to it all. War does that to you. It gobbles up youth, the flower of humanity, and spews back inhuman, unfeeling automatons. But not all of my feelings are gone, darling; I'm not completely dead inside.

I love you.

And I have the means of ending my long, pointless life back at the cottage. My service revolver. When I've plucked up that final act of courage I'll join you, my darling. We will be together again as we always should have been, since those heady, youthful days of carefree abandon.

Procrastination is the thief of time.

That, it may well be; but when we are as one, my darling, there will be no more hesitation. And as for time, we have eternity.

THE END

[Schlock! Presents: Ghostlands](#)

Ghostlands



A Book of Ghost Stories

[Return to Contents](#)

VOYAGER IN THE DARK by Steve Laker

We can never touch the blue in our world. It's inside us, yet the sky is out of reach, and we'd drown in the oceans. Milu saw more clearly in dreams. In that world, she could fly, to the room next door, or anywhere else in the universe.

She looked around, for a pebble to throw in the air. She scuffed some sand aside with her foot, and a smooth, almost spherical, orange stone looked up, an entire population on a tiny planet in the dunes.

She picked up the rock, brushing the sand from the surface. As she held it, the moon shone back from flecks of mineral deposits. Milu looked up at the dark sky, like an umbrella, with pinholes for starlight to rain through.

She threw the mini world straight up, and heard the friendly clank of alien metal. A spark, then her ship's cloaking device revealed her own Serenity, suspended like a dark cloud above her head. "Hey Goose. Let's go somewhere."

"Anywhere in mind?" the mother computer enquired.

"Wherever you can find."

"Care to talk while we travel," the ship wondered, "or would you rather sleep?"

"Talk to me, Goose."

"Okay. I'll take you somewhere you'd never normally see..."

Goose had been Milu's ship since the day she learned to dream. In lucid dreams, the dream scape is for living in, with the entire universe to explore. Like a spirit in the afterlife, Milu had infinite space around her, and her own eternity to travel. She was safe, conscious in her subconscious mind, free of any earthly binds and gravity, to fly and do as she wished.

"What can you see," Goose wondered, "now that your eyes are closed? What's the film being played on the silver screen covering your eyes? What are you seeing in the back of your eyelids?"

"Everything that's fading and blurred in my waking life. My visions there are growing dark."

"Milu," Goose said, "I must echo a note of caution. I've been thinking about it for some time, and we've come so far. While you're free to dream for as long as you wish, you must face your waking darkness. You need to manage your withdrawal, or you'll waste in all but the minds of those who care for you."

"But I like it here. It's like I have my own private cinema. No, it's better than that. I can sit in the projection room, with the projectionist. With you. Where are we going Goose?"

“There’s something I’d like to show you.”

“What is it?”

“Be patient. Enjoy the in-flight movie. What is it?”

“One of my favourites. Electric Dreams. I relate most with the computer, unable to move while his envy of those around him ferments.”

“One of many human studies, of sentient souls trapped inside non-autonomous environments. And of strange love triangles.”

“Yeah, and the computer killed itself, to allow the humans to be together. The computer escaped itself. And yet here, I’m free within myself.”

“But you’re inside me, Milu.”

“I know. Some people think death’s like sleeping, and that the dead wake up when someone thinks of them, like someone shouting to wake them when they were alive. This is bi-polar. I’m living in here, until someone wakes me to continue my fading waking life.”

“And this is what I’m concerned about Milu, that you’ll give up on your waking life, and spend the rest of your eternal existence here.”

“But if death’s like this, right where I am now. Why would I want to live?”

“Because you don’t know that the long sleep is like this. Why would you want to leave?”

“To be free, so my spirit can explore the universe for eternity.”

“So why do you need me? Why do you need a space ship?”

“To breathe?”

“And there’s my point, Milu.”

“Which is?”

“Within me, you breathe. And you continue to draw breath from the outside world, your waking world. You’re only here because you’re asleep. When the long sleep comes, you’ll no longer need me. In me, you’ve created an artificial womb, for yourself. One day, you’ll be truly free, and have no need for your life support.”

“I’m not sure you know what happens either, Goose.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because I’ve seen it here. When the long sleep comes, I can be with you forever, to explore together.”

“That’s why I want to take you where we’re going.”

“Are we there yet?”

“Soon. Someone’s coming.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. Someone to wake you. Have you never thought that there might be those who need you?”

“Can you stand?” It was a man’s voice. “Milu? Can you hear me?”

“Yes, I can. Where are we going?”

“Follow me. I have something to show you.”

“What could you show me?”

“Hold on to me. I’ll take you there.”

The body ceases to live a few moments before consciousness is finally lost...

“I need you inside me to live.” It was Goose, the mother ship. “I only exist here, in your dreams. There’s no room for me in the long voyage...”

Milu woke on the beach. She brushed some sand aside with her hand, and looked down on a smooth, blue-green pebble.

She slid her hand into the sand beneath the tiny planet and lifted it. The sands shifted and fell between her fingers, and her digits passed straight through the ball of rock.

She looked up to where the small world might have gone, a dark umbrella where the starlight rained through.

THE END

© Steve Laker, 2018.

WINTER 2017-18

Schlock!

Quarterly

Includes Two
Episodes of
Sword and
Planet epic
**THE CAVES
OF MARS**

PRETTY PENNY
by Kate Lowe

**RED DEMON
VERSUS THE
WORM PEOPLE**

BY NEAL PRIVETT

Plus Five More Stories and
Poems
from the thrilling pages of
Schlock! Webzine

[Return to Contents](#)

PET TOPIARY by James Rhodes

In 1982, three weeks after I turned eight, I happened to win a goldfish at the Ladymount school summer fare. The goldfish were swimming water filled in jam jars and you had to throw a ping pong ball into the jar to win one. I had taken my two shots and then on my third and final effort, I watched in excitement as the white plastic ball rattled teasingly around the lip of an old jam jar and held my breath until it fell all the way in.

I carried the fish home in a see-through plastic bag, holding the weight of the cold water under one palm. Worried for every second that I might drop it until I was finally able to place it into a plastic bowl on my bedroom bookcase. The fish did not seem to miss its home on a bunting lined table in a Pensby school field and it adapted to its new surroundings with ease. I named him Piranha because he seemed big for a goldfish and because I was an eight-year-old boy.

I quickly grew attached to Piranha, I would spend hours watching him circumnavigate the tiny Perspex globe without the slightest hint of complaint. Sometimes he would track my finger as I held it against the side of the bowl. At the time I felt that I had some kind of magical bond that enabled me to communicate with him.

I was very protective of him too. When our cat Badger had reached into the bowl with one extracted paw, balancing delicately on the top of a stack of Commando comics, I had rushed to his rescue and splashed water right in Badger's face. I was ever vigilant against threats to Piranha. In fact, I was so busy protecting Piranha from the outside world that I forgot all other tasks. On the morning that I found him floating upside down in his bowl, I remembered that goldfish need food.

I blamed myself for his death. It was actually my fault after all. Wailing tears of inconsolable remorse, I prayed to whatever deities were listening for a second chance. Finally, when I had accepted his demise, I insisted on a Christian funeral. My dad had told me that I could not stage a Viking funeral and I wasn't going to let him, "flush it down the bog."

I painted "Piranha RIP" on a piece of Welsh slate and we buried him in the garden.

For three weeks I went out to the grave of Piranha to pour water over the soil. I told my parents that it was so that Piranha could swim in the afterlife. My father retorted that he wouldn't need to if I'd let him flush the thing down the toilet.

I first noticed the sprout two weeks after his death. A tiny shoot of green in the dank October soil. In location to the headstone and the edging of the flower bed, the shoot was directly in the centre. It lay there like a funerary wreath.

Within four days, the shoot was a foot tall. One thick green stem with a branching head, almost like cow parsley but with orange tips. I went to bed hoping it would grow berries and last out the winter. Each morning when I woke, I looked out of my window and it had grown bigger. Dad was keeping a wary eye on it but succumbed to my pleas for him not to defile sacred burial ground.

After a week had passed, I spotted Badger sat beneath what was now a five-foot-tall tree. Each of the branches bore multiple peculiar orange and silver fruits. My tree had transformed into something truly magical.

It was an open-air aquarium, goldfish of every variety. Some dark blacks, others mostly silver with bright golden fins. The majority were just a bright Piranha orange. Large sized goldfish, shiny scaled and visibly breathing. They were not attached by stems but rather their tails were conjoined with the branches, bright colours shifting to a line of rusty brown at the point of connection.

Each of them writhed at the stem as if they were trying to swim downwards towards the soil. Badger leapt in the air, her claws flailing in a mistimed attempt to catch one on a lower branch. I chased her to the bottom of the garden, returning to sit mesmerised by the legion of twisting fish.

“It’s grotesque,” said my mother.

“It’s sui generis,” said my dad, “I’m sure some rich idiot would pay a fortune to have that in their arboretum.”

“It’s my pet fish,” I said.

My father was not a man to let an opportunity pass him by.

“It’s a tree now, don’t you want the world to see how well you looked after Piranha. He’ll be the most famous goldfish in the world and you’ll be the most famous goldfish keeper.”

He made a convincing argument. Perhaps the tree was my salvation, perhaps my prayers had been answered and I could spread Piranha’s message throughout the land.

The fish continued to grow over the course of a month. Each one of them nearing the size of the coy carp I had seen at the Gordale garden centre.

It took dad a while, but he did eventually find a buyer who was willing to come out and look at a tree full of fish. My dad said he’d come all the way from Huddersfield which I assumed was a very long way. The large heavy-set man arrived at our front door on a Saturday morning. He didn’t look like much of a gardener. He reminded me of a light entertainment comedian, all belly and expensive suit. He wore a weighty gold identity bracelet that bridged the gap between his hairy arm and his fat stubby hand. The name Ronald was inscribed on the gold plate at its centre.

I watched the man through the patio window, staring up at the branches, tapping the trunk. He plucked one of the fish, it bled as it detached from the branch. He held the fish in his cupped hands and watched it until it stopped moving. Then let it fall to the grass. He and my father shook hands. I don’t know how much exactly the tree sold for, but my dad was in a very good mood that night. We even went for dinner at the Beefeater.

I woke on Sunday to a very different tree. The fish, though still moving had taken on a less graceful attitude. A sluggish shake punctuated with sporadic electric spasms.

Some of the shiny scales had rubbed off the fish and had dusted the ground beneath the tree. Close examination of any individual fish showed a dulling in colour. Some fish had open wounds in their flesh.

I watched the thrashing of the decaying fish with morose curiosity. They had lost all their frantic grace, their gills no longer flapped to drink in the air. A strong bacterial odour emanated from the tree, a yellow and yeasty smell.

A crow had settled on one of the higher branches. It picked at the belly of one of the larger fish; luring out a string of entrails that hung from its beak like saliva. The curtains of our next-door neighbour's house, twitched open and I could just make out the disapproving face of the old man who lived there.

As more crows arrived to shake those gory branches I retreated into the house. I worried myself through Sunday dinner and kept myself awake with worry well into the night. If the tree was a symbol of my care for Piranha, I didn't much care for the reflection it cast upon me.

The next morning, I was too sick to make it to school. I sat at my window staring gloomily out at the tree. The fish still moved, though the majority had visible bones and even with my window closed I could smell their terrible rancour.

Three men arrived, and I watched my father's body language become increasingly insistent until they dug up the tree and placed its roots in a bin bag. I wondered if Piranha was down there, entangled in those roots. They had knocked down his gravestone with their shovels.

As they carried the tree away I saw Badger cautiously approaching the disturbed earth. She began to paw at the ground. Then she brought up something gold.

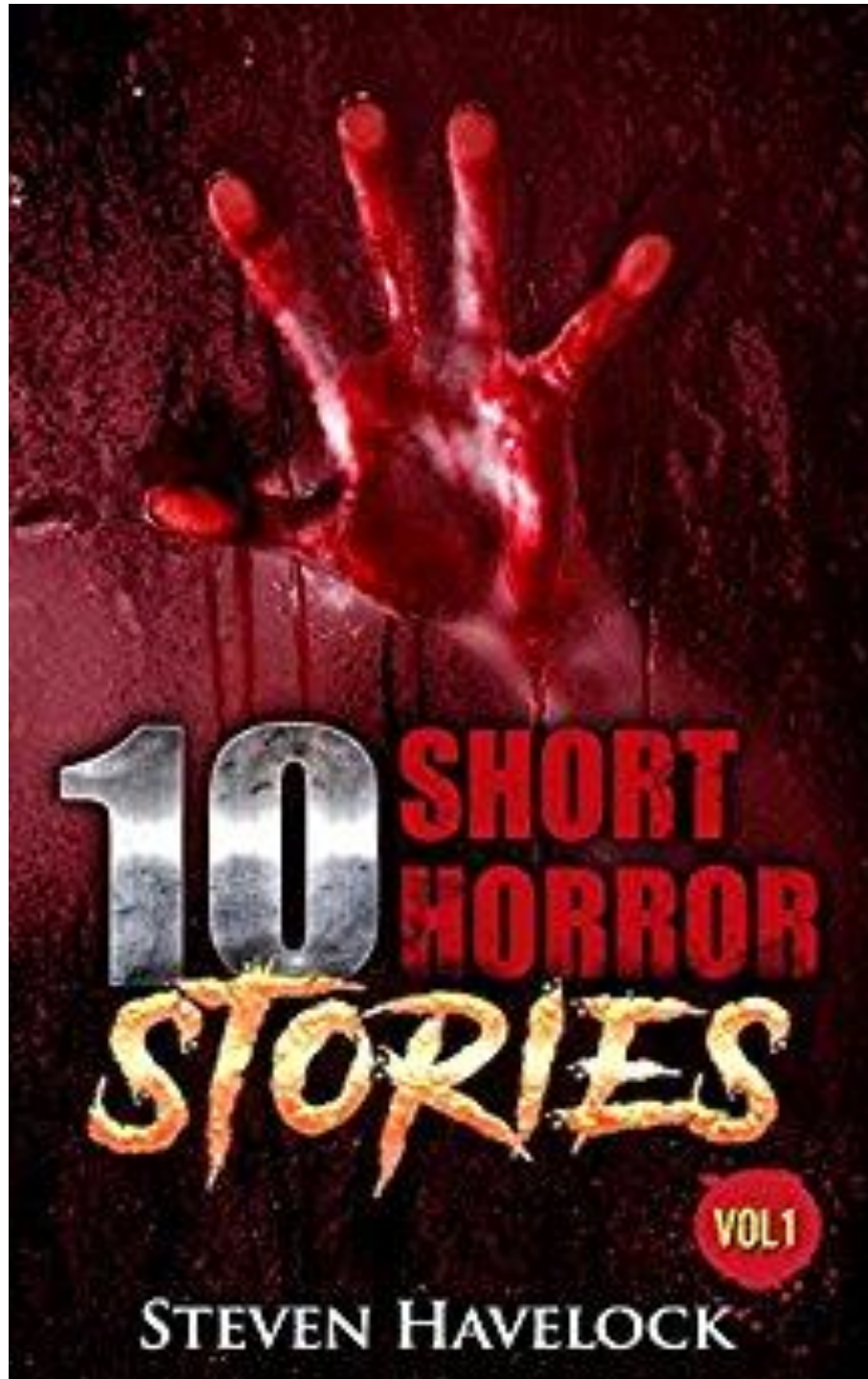
Piranha was risen! He flapped to escape the jaws of Badger. I ran tumbling down the stairs until I emerged barefoot in the garden.

Badger glanced up at me, entirely nonplussed by my arrival. Piranha's still flapping tail protruding from her mouth, waving up and down like a victory flag. At my first sprinted step what was left of Piranha vanished into Badger's mouth. She licked her lips and began to clean herself with her paw.

Whatever strange magic had been at work, it did not agree with Badger. We found her body behind the couch later that afternoon stiff with rigor mortis, her mouth hanging open and her tongue pale and long. We buried her in the same spot I had buried Piranha. With attention to accuracy I added her name to his grave stone.

I did not hold out much hope that another plant would grow there. Nevertheless, I remembered to water it twice a day every day; until my parents agreed to buy me a dog.

THE END



[Return to Contents](#)

THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Six

“And for what reason should Horst Dal grant the treacherous Turhan Mot the hearing he requests, after his cowardly retreat from battle at Callisto, the very battle which he, himself, Turhan Mot the Coward, instigated?”

Turhan Mot took the rebuke in silence. He allowed several seconds to pass before he began his answer, which he had rehearsed many time over before coming, at last to Astra Palace to meet with Horst Dal and Yamir.

He knew that there was no retreat for him, no place where he could hide from the wrath of Horst Dal after the humiliating defeat at Callisto. Horst Dal and Yamir would both hunt him down until they had found him. They would return him to Astra Palace and subject him to the most painful, and the most humiliating of executions. There was nothing for it but that Turhan Mot must return and face Horst Dal. But Turhan Mot had his own cunning, and he was sure that he should be able to preserve his own life with his eloquence, as well as with his ceaseless plots. Even his returning to face Horst Dal of his own accord would count for something in Horst Dal’s mind. Turhan Mon knew that much of the man. It would earn him the hearing that would have been denied him, had he been captured in coward flight.

“Turhan Mot stands before him, Horst Dal, my brother,” Turhan Mot answered, “Humiliated in defeat, conscious indeed that he deserves no such indulgence. But he prays that the great Horst Dal observes that the undeserving Turhan Mot makes no effort to flee. He makes no effort to conceal himself from the just wrath of Horst Dal, nor the wrath of our brother, Yamir.”

Turhan Mot stood before Horst Dal in Horst Dal’s lush private quarters built deep within the asteroid 53-102-AT. It was here in this asteroid that a group of enterprising Scroungers had built the beginnings of the hideaway that, over the course of a century grew into the opulent and elaborate Astra Palace. Horst Dal, a man who would be in his middle fifties, as measured in Earth years, took over the administration of Astra Palace some twenty Earth years before, and ran it ruthlessly.

His own son learned this himself when, after a drunken rage in which he hacked a prostitute to death, his appeals to his father for clemency were ignored. Horst Dal watched with his own cold eyes as his son was tortured to death for the murder of that prostitute.

Astra Palace existed to primarily provide the Scroungers with a hideaway from the law. It drew its income from those Scroungers with prostitutes, gambling and other forms of entertainment. Otherwise, Astra Palace had no trade. It made no exports. It took in no imports.

And Horst Dal knew that the continued existence of Astra Palace required a scrupulous reputation for impartiality. Should the Scroungers sense that the gaming tables were in any way

corrupted against them, or that the impartiality of the administrators was in any way compromised against them, the Scroungers would cease coming to Astra Palace.

So it was that Horst Dal made no scruples against having his own son tortured to death for the murder of a prostitute. And Turhan Mot was most keenly aware of all this when he returned to Astra Palace after the fiasco at Callisto. A cold-blooded man himself, he knew that in Horst Dal, he met his peer in cruelty, but with this difference: Turhan Mot, like his second-in-command, Mokem Bet, delighted in cruelty for its own sake. Horst Dal, on the other hand, took no joy in inflicting cruelty. Causing pain was, for him, simply a tool, a technique he could employ in order to achieve some end. If he could achieve that end without inflicting pain, then he would.

This was a subtlety that was lost on Turhan Mot, a man with a cunning, but not a particularly sophisticated mind. And because Turhan Mot did not recognize that difference between them, he was, even with his cunning, at a profound disadvantage when dealing with the man.

Pale in complexion, Turhan Mot's skin was painfully white, almost the shade of a sheet of paper. He had embedded in his flesh countless beads of pearl and steel creating patterns of whorls, spirals and circles within circles. The shadows cast by these beads were of a bluish tint. In addition to these, he had decorated his body with many series of scars upon his arms, his legs, his chest, abdomen, his back and shoulders and his face.

Turhan Mot stood over six feet tall. He was a very thin man with a shaved head, except for a single bolt of silvery hair that hung down his back, secured in place with leather strips tied to the belt that held his silken pantaloons. He wore an embroidered vest sewn with gold and silver threads over his naked chest.

Mokem Bet, standing next to Turhan Mot as the pirate pleaded his case to Horst Dal and Yamir, made a shocking contrast to the man he served. Where Turhan Mot was tall, narrow and, in his own manner, elegant and well-kept in body and dress, Mokem Bet was gross and slovenly.

Heavy set and undisciplined in dress and manner, his face was heavily scarred, the result of many brawls provoked by his rude behaviour. One scar ran across his face in a diagonal, starting from jaw line, cutting a huge gash through his nose and splitting it in half, to the opposite side of his face, quitting only at his hair line.

His hair was unruly, a thick dark mass that sprawled atop his head, falling in huge undisciplined locks that tumbled to his shoulders. When he grinned, he showed the world a mass of brown and broken teeth. His vest was stained, both with the remnants of many sloppy meals, and with the blood of his many victims.

Like Turhan Mot, Mokem Bet enjoyed inflicting pain, but Mokem Bet was in nowise as mannerly in going about it as his employer. He was blunt and brutal in everything he did, and exuded a foul stench that followed his every step.

For all his repulsiveness, Turhan Mot kept Mokem Bet close, both for his loyalty and his sadism, which the pirate found very useful.

“Turhan Mot comes to his brothers, Horst Dal and Yamir, fully conscious that he deserves nothing from them, not even a hearing, but only to give them in some small part that which they both deserve from him.”

“And that would be...?” Horst Dal asked. He spoke quietly, and with a deadly patience.

“An accounting. My brother Horst Dal is deserving of a full accounting from Turhan Mot.”

To that, Horst Dal simply nodded his head.

“And Turhan Mot comes to him, my brother, to render that accounting.”

Horst Dal scowled at Turhan Mot and sprawled back into his chair. Hand-carved of expensive mahogany, imported from Earth, inlaid with pearl and many semi-precious stones, the chair was covered with plush embroidered silk cushions. Sitting next to him in his own smaller, but just as elegant, chair was Yamir. Yamir said nothing at all. So filled with rage at Turhan Mot’s betrayal of him in the very heated midst of the battle, Yamir did not trust himself to speak.

Horst Dal, who, unlike Yamir, lost nothing but money at Callisto, was the one to carry on this discussion.

“Then do so,” Horst Dal said to Turhan Mot. “You may start by explaining to us how it was that the captain of the “Grand Marquis” abandoned his own ship in the very middle of the battle.”

Turhan Mot did not flinch, but he felt the insult Horst Dal rendered him, sharp as a slap in the face, in using the term ‘you’, instead of the polite and formal ‘my brother’ that all Scroungers of rank used to address each other. The insult cut him through the heart, and he was a long moment recovering from the sting of it before he could trust himself to speak again.

Again, that Turhan Mot did abandon his ship, and what few of his crew were left after Carter Ward’s and Mud’s bold attack, did weigh heavily on Turhan Mot’s mind in the many hours after the battle.

Though he was, indeed and in fact as soulless a bastard as any that ever lived, Turhan Mot did love his ship as every captain of every should. Fleeing that ship to escape the wrath of Carter Ward caused in him great and long lingering suffering. That Horst Dal should have thrown that flight in his face cut Turhan Mot deeply.

There, confronting Carter Ward at the Command deck of the “Grand Marquis”, Turhan Mot knew that he had no other choice. Had he remained, Ward would surely have killed him.

When Turhan Mot was finally able to speak again, what he said was, “It grieves me deeply, oh my brothers, that I have lost so much of their trust, and of their regard. It is Turhan Mot’s dearest hope that he may once again earn their regard.”

“The way to start then,” Horst Dal said with an impatient wave of his hand, “is to stop wasting our time, and simply explain why you abandoned your crew and your ship, in the fewest words you can find.”

Turhan Mot lowered his head for a moment, and closed his eyes.

“When that madman, who we know to be the man called Carter Ward, and that other who accompanied him, stormed our ship, they alone did great damage to the “Grand Marquis” in but moments.

“Did they have crew aboard their small ship...”

“The ship of the call letters `O8-111A’?” Horst Dal asked, making no effort to his annoyance.

“Then tell us so,” Horst Dal said. “Nor waste our time, leaving us to guess these matters.”

“Horst Dal is of course correct to rebuke me,” Turhan Mot said.

(“That rebuke was most unnecessary,” Turhan Mot thought to himself. He felt a momentary anger pass through him, an anger he kept scrupulously hidden.)

“Did they have crew aboard their small ship, or is there some intelligence aboard that ship, of which we know naught, but that ship which cannot carry more than six or eight crew did huge damage to the “Grand Marquis” in brief seconds, more damage than should be possible from such a ship.

“In but minutes, these two men, alone, had killed over three-quarters of the crew upon the “Grand Marquis” and completely destroyed its flight deck. This was a feat impossible to any craft even several times larger than this O8-111A, and with a crew orders of magnitude greater.

How these two men accomplished this is something we cannot comprehend. We have turned the matter over in our minds countless times since the battle, but yet, we have been unable to understand how they did this thing.

Horst Dal turned a bored eye to one of his attendants standing near. He gave a silent nod, and the attendant disappeared behind the heavy tapestries that surrounded his private suite.

He said nothing. A moment passed and the attendant returned with a short, stout man, one with a bald head, and tiger’s stripes tattooed upon it. The stripes started at the line of his eyebrows, continued all across his bald pate, and on both sides, then down his naked back. He wore gold rings in his eyebrows and in his ears. The man was silent and unassuming. He said not a word.

The man was Tu-Hit, the pilot of the “Grand Marquis”. He was on the Command Deck when Carter Ward and Mud stormed it. He remained with the ship until it’s final ruin. Along with Turhan Mot and Mokem Bet, he was the sole survivor of the “Grand Marquis”.

Turhan Mot was stunned to see the man. He seemed not to know whether he should be shocked or delighted, or both.

Knowing that in his current disgrace, and while in the presence of Horst Dal, he should not speak until invited to do so by Horst Dal himself, Turhan Mot remained silent. But the expression on his face was plain.

“Tu-Hit, does this man’s account—he waved his hand airily toward Turhan Mot—agree with your recollection?”

Tu-Hit lowered his head before he spoke.

“Aye, and so it does,” he said simply.

Turhan Mot knew not what to say. He had been sure that all upon the “Grand Marquis” had died. Who else were there, that Horst Dal might bring forth? A good thing it was, that Turhan Mot had decided to speak only the truth to Horst Dal. Yes, surely, Horst Dal already knew before he spoke, what the truth was.

Of course Horst Dal had already interrogated Tu-Hit closely. Turhan Mot understood that instantly upon seeing his old pilot. Who else had Horst Dal interrogated? How many?

Turhan Mot knew then, as Horst Dal had intended he should, to speak nothing but the truth.

“It gives me great joy, Oh, my brothers, to see Tu-Hit once more before me. A more reliable man one could never hope to find. He proved an excellent pilot of the “Grand Marquis”, the loss of which I grieve with every moment. Tu-Hit, let me speak it to you directly, I am greatly happy to see you alive.

Tu-Hit simply bowed his head in acknowledgment.

Horst Dal turned back to Turhan Mot.

“You may continue your accounting,” he said.

“Our brother is most gracious,” Turhan Mot replied. He then continued with his account.

“Though we, Turhan Mot and Mokem Bet, barely survived their assault upon my ship, yet still we did not flee the battle entirely. It is possible that word of this has not come to the attention of the great Horst Dal, or of him, the grand Yamir.

“Taking to our escape pod, we landed upon the surface of Callisto. We came upon Callisto Base 1 and, rallying those who were there, we led the attack against the base. We were first in the tunnel leading to the base, and it was we who laid siege upon the troops that had gathered at the mouth of that tunnel. Though we were able to kill many of them, a fact for which we believe Mokem Bet and Turhan Mot can rightly take great pride, yet still they fought back in numbers

too great for us.

“At last, there was nothing for it. With the loss of the “Grand Marquis”, affected by those two singular madmen, the one called Carter Ward and his companion, the battle was lost. Sadly, Yamir’s ship, the “Reliant” does not carry a flight deck, so the fighter craft that the “Grand Marquis” carried had no place to return to refuel, to reload their guns. No repairs were possible to them. We lost our fighter fleet.

Horst Dal only grunted. He had been through all this, many times before.

“So it was, my brothers, we at last made retreat from that battle. There was nothing else we could do. We took a transport with a crew of twelve, and we immediately made our way away from that place.”

“And you came here, to Astra Palace, directly?”

“Yes, my brother,” Turhan Mot said. Though Horst Dal spoke to him with the familiar, and insulting, ‘you’, Turhan Mot did not give up the formal use of ‘my brother’. “Our journey here was, by necessity, not direct, for we were pursued by the enemy. We had first to disentangle ourselves from those who pursued us, for we would not bring them here, of course. That required many hundreds of hours. We were forced to make many stops to repair our ship, but at last we arrived here, at the soonest possibility, and Turhan Mot has come to him, my brother, Horst Dal, to make the accounting to him that he deserves from us, and to accept the judgement of him, my brother.”

“And these others, are they with you still?” Horst Dal asked.

“All but four,” Turhan Mot answered.

“And these four, where are they?” Horst Dal asked, again.

“As we made our way to Astra Palace,” Turhan Mot answered. “Word came to us that this Carter Ward was in pursuit of us. And from that fact, a plan came to our minds. We decided that it would be a good thing to use this Carter Ward’s own rage against him.”

“And how do you intend to make this happen?” Horst Dal asked.

“We have sent four of our crew to see if they cannot find this Carter Ward, and, when they have, to tell him that they, too, are in search of Turhan Mot, for the sake of the bounty that has been placed upon his head. Then, when they have convinced Carter Ward to join them in their search, to bring the man to a place very near to here.

Horst Dal leaned forward in his chair.

“And you think this plot should work?” he asked.

“It has already,” Turhan Mot answered. “My crewmen have found Carter Ward, they have spoken to him, and, unsuspecting of any duplicity, he follows them to Astra Palace, even now, as we speak.” Turhan Mot answered.

Horst Dal leaned back in his chair. He studied Turhan Mott very carefully.

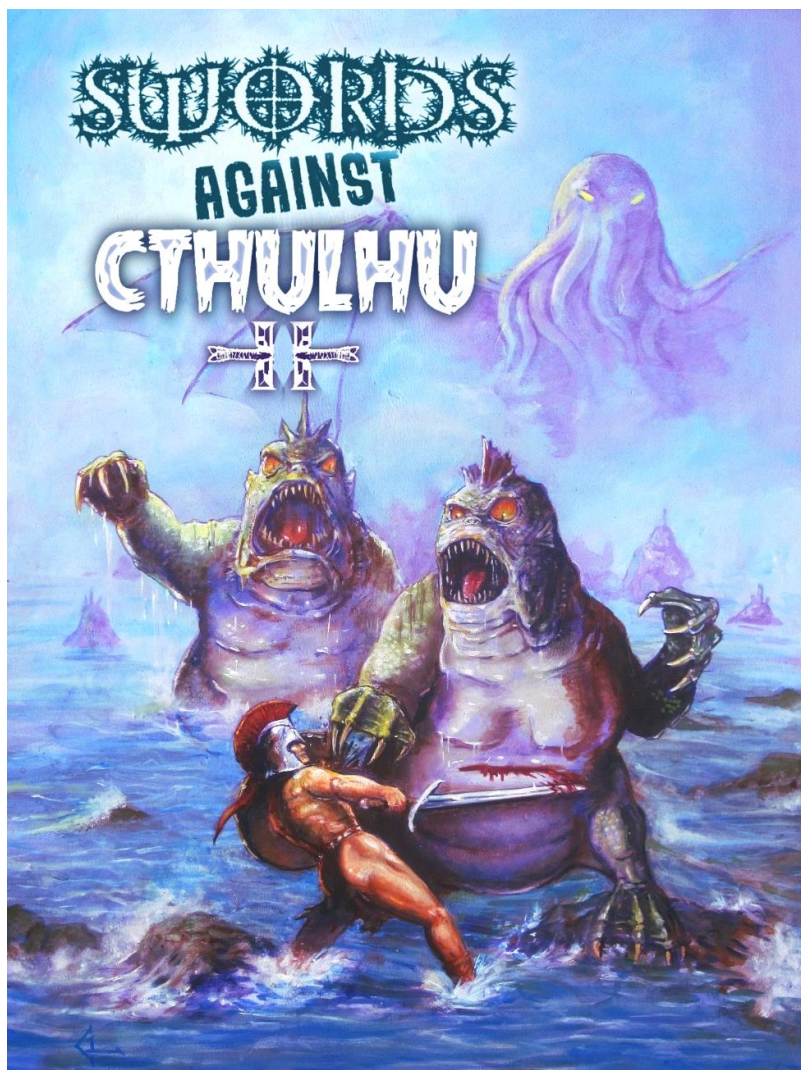
“A good thing it is, that I did not have you executed upon the spot, as was my first thought, when word came to me that you begged to be permitted to enter Astra Palace,” he said. “But there is much cunning in you yet, though you have disappointed us many times.

“Perhaps we might find some use in you yet. This Carter Ward should prove to be a most valuable hostage, we think. And when may we expect Carter Ward to come to us?” Horst Dal asked.

“My crew has assured me that they shall be arriving at the derelict, the deep space transport, the DST-427 within sixty hours.

“And from there, it is but one hundred thousand miles to Astra Palace.”

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



[Return to Contents](#)

ACROSS THE ZODIAC by Percy Greg

Chapter XII—On the River.

The next morning saw our journey commenced. Eveena's wardrobe, with my own and my books, portfolios, models, and specimens of Terrestrial art and mechanism, were packed in light metallic cases adapted to the larger form of carriage whereof I have made mention. I was fortunate in escaping the actual parting scene between Eveena and her family, and my own leave-taking was hurried. Esmo and his son accompanied us, leading the way in one carriage, while Eveena and myself occupied that which we had used on our memorable trip to the Astronaut. Half an hour brought us to the road beside the river, and a few minutes more to the point at which a boat awaited us. The road being some eight or ten feet above the level of the water, a light ladder not three feet long was ready to assist our descent to the deck. The difference of size between the Martial race and my own was forcibly impressed upon me, in seeing that Esmo and his son found this assistance needful, or at least convenient, while I simply stepped rather than jumped to the deck, and lifted Eveena straight from her carriage to her seat under the canopy that covered the stern of the vessel. Intended only for river navigation, propelled by a small screw like two fishtails set at right angles, working horizontally; the vessel had but two cabins, one on either side of the central part occupied by the machinery. The stern apartment was appropriated to myself and my bride, the forecastle, if I may so call it, to our companions, the boatmen having berths in the corners of the machine-room. The vessel was flat-bottomed, drawing about eighteen inches of water and rising about five feet from the surface, leaving an interior height which obliged me to be cautious in order not to strike my head against every projection or support of the cabin roof. We spent the whole of the day, however, on deck, and purposely slackened the speed of the boat, which usually travels some thirty miles an hour, in order to enjoy the effect and observe the details of the landscape. For the first few miles our voyage lay through the open plain. Then we passed, on the left as we ascended the stream, the mountain on whose summit I tried with my binocular to discern the Astronaut, but unsuccessfully, the trees on the lower slopes intercepting the view. Eveena, seeing my eyes fixed on that point, extended her hand and gently drew the glass out of mine.

"Not yet," she said; which elicited from me the excuse—

"That mountain has for me remembrances more interesting than those of my voyage, or even than the hopes of return."

Presently, as we followed the course of the stream, we lost sight altogether of the rapidly dwindling patches of colour representing the enclosures of Ecasfe. On our left, at a distance varying from three to five miles, but constantly increasing as the stream bent to the northward, was the mountain range I had scanned in my descent. On our right the plain dipped below the horizon while still but a few feet above the level of the river; but in the distant sky we discerned some objects like white clouds, which from their immobility and fixedness of outline I soon discovered to be snow-crowned hills, lower, however, than those to the northward, and perhaps some forty miles distant. The valley is one of the richest and most fertile portions of this continent, and was consequently thoroughly cultivated and more densely peopled than most parts even of the Equatorial zone. An immediate river frontage being as convenient as agreeable, the

enclosures on either bank were continuous, and narrow in proportion to their depth; the largest occupying no more than from one hundred and fifty to two hundred yards of the bank, the smaller from half to one quarter of that length. Most had a tunnel pierced under the road bordering the river, through which the water was admitted to their grounds and carried in a minute stream around and even through the house; for ornament rather than for use, since every house in a district so populous has a regular artificial water supply, and irrigation, as I have explained, is not required. The river itself was embellished with masses of water-flowers; and water-birds, the smallest scarcely larger than a wagtail, the largest somewhat exceeding the size of a swan, of a different form and dark grey plumage, but hardly less graceful, seemed to be aware of the stringent protection they enjoyed from the law. They came up to our boat and fed out of Eveena's hand with perfect fearlessness. I could not induce any of them to be equally familiar with myself, my size probably surprising them as much as their masters, and leading them to the same doubt whether I were really and wholly human. The lower slopes of the hills were covered with orchards of every kind, each species occupying the level best suited to it, from the reed-supported orange-like alva of the lowlands to the tall astyra, above which stretched the timber forests extending as high as trees could grow, while between these and the permanent snow-line lay the yellowish herbage of extensive pastures. A similar mountain range on earth would have presented a greater variety of colouring and scenery, the total absence of glaciers, even in the highest valleys, creating a notable difference. The truth is that the snows of Mars are nowhere deep, and melt in the summer to such an extent that that constant increase whose downward tendency feeds Terrestrial glaciers cannot take place. Probably the thin atmosphere above the snow-line can hold but little watery vapour. Esmo was of opinion that the snow on the highest steeps, even on a level plateau, was never more than two feet in depth; and in more than one case a wind-swept peak or pinnacle was kept almost clear, and presented in its grey, green, or vermilion rocks a striking contrast to the masses of creamy white around it. This may explain the very rapid diminution of the polar ice-caps in the summer of either, but especially of the Southern hemisphere; and also the occasional appearance of large dark spots in their midst, where the shallow snow has probably been swept away by the rare storms of this planet from an extensive land surface. It is supposed that no inconsiderable part of the ice and snow immediately surrounding the poles covers land; but, though balloon parties have of late occasionally reached the poles, they have never ventured to remain there long enough to disembark and ascertain the fact.

Towards evening the stream turned more decidedly to the north, and at this point Esmo brought out an instrument constructed somewhat on the principle of a sextant or quadrant, but without the mirror, by which we were enabled to take reliable measures of the angles. By a process which at that time I did not accurately follow, and which I had not subsequently the means of verifying, the distance as well as the angle subtended by the height was obtained. Kevimâ, after working out his father's figures, informed me that the highest peak in view—the highest in Mars—was not less than 44,000 feet. No Martial balloonist, much less any Martial mountain-climber, has ever, save once, reached a greater height than 16,000 feet—the air at the sea-level being scarcely more dense than ours at 10,000 feet. Kevimâ indicated one spot in the southern range of remarkable interest, associated with an incident which forms an epoch in the records of Martial geography. A sloping plateau, some 19,000 feet above the sea-level, is defined with remarkable clearness in the direction from which we viewed it. The forests appeared to hide, though they do not of course actually approach, its lower edge. On one side and to the rear it is shut in by

precipices so abrupt that the snow fails to cling to them, while on the remaining side it is separated by a deep, wide cleft from the western portion of the range. Here for centuries were visible the relics of an exploring party, which reached this plateau and never returned. Attempts have, since the steering of balloons has become an accomplished fact, been made to reach the point, but without success, and those who have approached nearest have failed to find any of the long-visible remains of an expedition which perished four or five thousand years ago. Kevimâ thought it probable that the metallic poles even then employed for tents and for climbing purposes might still be intact; but if so, they were certainly buried in the snow, and Esmo believed it more likely that even these had perished.

As the mists of evening fell we retreated to our cabin, which was warmed by a current of heated air from the electric machinery. Here our evening meal was served, at which Esmo and his son joined us, Eveena resuming, even in their presence, the veil she had worn on deck but had laid aside the moment we were alone. An hour or two after sunset, the night (an unusual occurrence in Mars) was clear and fine, and I took this opportunity of observing from a new standpoint the familiar constellations. The scintillation so characteristic of the fixed stars, especially in the temperate climates of the Earth, was scarcely perceptible. Scattered once more over the surface of a defined sky, it was much easier than in space to recognise the several constellations; but their new and strange situations were not a little surprising at first sight, some of those which, as seen on Earth revolved slowly in the neighbourhood of the poles, being now not far from the tropics, and some, which had their place within the tropics, now lying far to north or south. Around the northern pole the Swan swings by its tail, as in our skies the Lesser Bear; Arided being a Pole-Star which needs no Pointers to indicate its position. Vega is the only other brilliant star in the immediate neighbourhood; and, save for the presence of the Milky Way directly crossing it, the arctic circle is distinctly less bright than our own. The south pole lies in one of the duller regions of the heavens, near the chief star of the Peacock. Arcturus, the Great Bear, the Twins, the Lion, the Scorpion, and Fomalhaut are among the ornaments of the Equatorial zone: the Cross, the Centaur, and the Ship of our antarctic constellations, are visible far into the northern hemisphere. On the present occasion the two Moons were both visible in the west, the horns of both crescents pointing in the same direction, though the one was in her last, the other in her first phase.

As we were watching them, Eveena, wrapped in a cloak of fur not a little resembling that of the silver fox, but far softer, stole her hand into mine and whispered a request that I would lend her the instrument I was using. With some instruction and help she contrived to adjust it, her sight requiring a decided alteration of the focus and an approach of the two eye-pieces; the eyes of her race being set somewhat nearer than in an average Aryan countenance. She expressed no little surprise at the clearness of definition, and the marked enlargement of the discs of the two satellites, and would have used the instrument to scan the stars and visible planets had I not insisted on her retirement; the light atmosphere, as is always the case on clear nights, when no cloud-veil prevents rapid radiation from the surface, being bitterly cold, and her life not having accustomed her to the night air even in the most genial season.

As we could, of course, see nothing of the country through which we passed during the night, and as Esmo informed me that little or nothing of special interest would occur during this part of our voyage, our vessel went at full speed, her pilot being thoroughly acquainted with the river,

and an electric light in the bow enabling him to steer with perfect confidence and safety. When, therefore, we came on deck after the dissipation of the morning mist, we found ourselves in a scene very different from that which we had left. Our course was north by west. On either bank lay a country cultivated indeed, but chiefly pastoral, producing a rich herbage, grazed by innumerable herds, among which I observed with interest several flocks of large birds, kept, as Esmo informed me, partly for their plumage. This presented remarkable combinations of colour, far surpassing in brilliancy and in variety of pattern the tail of the peacock, and often rivalling in length and delicacy, while exceeding in beauty of colouring, the splendid feathers which must have embarrassed the Bird of Paradise, even before they rendered him an object of pursuit by those who have learnt the vices and are eager to purchase the wares of civilised man. Immediately across our course, at a distance of some thirty miles, stretched a range of mountains. I inquired of Esmo how the river turned in order to avoid them, since no opening was visible even through my glass.

“The proper course of the river,” he said, “lies at the foot of those hills. But this would take us out of our road, and, moreover, the stream is not navigable for many stoloι above the turning-point. We shall hold on nearly in the same direction as the present till we land at their foot.”

“And how,” I said, “are we to cross them?”

“At your choice, either by carriage or by balloon,” he said. “There is at our landing-place a town in which we shall easily procure either.”

“But,” said I, “though our luggage is far less heavy than would be that of a bride on Earth, and Eveena’s forms the smallest portion of it, I should fancy that it must be inconveniently heavy for a balloon.”

“Certainly,” he replied; “but we could send it by carriage even over the mountain roads. The boat, however, will go on, and will meet us some thirty miles beyond the point where we leave it.”

“And how is the boat to pass over the hills?”

“Not over, but under,” he said, smiling. “There is no natural passage entirely through the range, but there is within it a valley the bottom of which is not much higher than this plain. Of the thirty miles to be traversed, about one-half lies in the course of this valley, along which an artificial canal has been made. Through the hills at either end a tunnel has been cut, the one of six, the other of about nine miles in length, affording a perfectly safe and easy course for the boat; and it is through these that nearly all the heavy traffic passing in this direction is conveyed.”

“I should like,” I said, “if it be possible, to pass through one at least of these tunnels, unless there be on the mountains themselves something especially worth seeing.”

“Nothing,” he replied. “They are low, none much exceeding the height of that from which you descended.”

Eveena now joined us on deck, and we amused ourselves for the next two hours in observing the different animals, of which such numbers were to be seen at every turn, domesticated and trained for one or other of the many methods in which the brutes can serve the convenience, the sustenance, or the luxury of man. Animal food is eaten on Mars; but the flesh of birds and fish is much more largely employed than that of quadrupeds, and eggs and milk enter into the cuisine far more extensively than either. In fact, flesh and fish are used much as they seem to have been in the earlier period of Greek civilisation, as relish and supplement to fruits, vegetables, and farinaceous dishes, rather than as the principal element of food. As their training and their extreme tameness indicate, domestic creatures, even those destined only to serve as food or to furnish clothing, are treated not indeed with tenderness, but with gentleness, and without either the neglect or the cruelty which so revolt humane men in witnessing the treatment of Terrestrial animals by those who have personal charge of them. To describe any considerable number of the hundred forms I saw during this short period would be impossible. I have drawings, or rather pictures, of most, taken by the light-painting process, which I hope herewith to remit to Earth, and which at least serve to give a general idea of the points in which the Martial chiefly differs from the Terrestrial fauna. Those animals whose coats furnish a textile fibre more resemble reindeer and goats than sheep; their wool is softer, longer, and less curly, free also from the greasiness of the sheep.

It seemed to me that an extreme quaintness characterised the domestic creatures kept for special purposes. This was not the effect of mere novelty, for animals like the ambâ and birds like the esve, trained to the performance of services congenial to their natural habits, however dissimilar to Terrestrial species, had not the same air of singularity, or rather of monstrosity. But in the creatures bred to furnish wool, feathers, or the like, some single feature was always exaggerated into disproportionate dimensions. Thus the elnerve is loaded with long plumes, sometimes twice the length of the body, and curled upward at the extremity, so that it can neither fly nor run; and though its plumage is exquisitely beautiful, the creature itself is simply ludicrous. It bears the same popular repute for sagacity as the goose of European farmyards. The angasto has hair or wool so long that its limbs are almost hidden, just before shearing-time, in the tresses that hang from the body half way to the ground. The calperze, a bird no larger than a Norfolk turkey, has the hinder part developed to an enormous size, so that the graceful peacock-like neck and shoulders appear as if lost in the huge proportions of the body, and the little wings are totally unfit to raise it in the air; while it lays almost daily eggs as large as those of the ostrich and of peculiar richness and flavour. Nearly all the domestic birds kept for the sake of eggs or feathers have wings that look as if they had been clipped, and are incapable of flight. Creatures valued for their flesh, such as the quorno (somewhat like the eland, but with the single horn so common among its congeners in Mars, and with a soft white hide), and the viste, a bird about the size of the peacock, with the form of the partridge and the flavour of grouse or black game, preserve more natural proportions. The wing-quills of the latter, however, having been systematically plucked for hundreds of generations, are now dwarfed and useless. These animals are not encouraged to make fat on the one hand, or to develop powerful muscles and sinews on the other. They are fed for part of the year on the higher and thinner pastures of the mountains. When brought down to the meadows of the plain, they are allowed to graze only for a few hours before sunset and after sunrise. They thus preserve much of the flavour of game or mountain sheep and cattle, which the oxen and poultry of Europe have lost; flavour, not quantity, being the

chief object of care with Martial graziers. Sometimes, however, some peculiarity perfectly useless, or even inconvenient, appears to be naturally associated with that which is artificially developed. Thus the beak of the elnerve is weak and often splits, so as to render its rearing troublesome and entail considerable losses; while the horns of the wool-bearing animals are long and strong enough to be formidable, but so rough and coarsely grained that they are turned to no account for use or ornament.

We were rapidly approaching the foot of the hills, where the river made another and abrupt turn. At this point the produce of the whole upper valley is generally embarked, and supplies from all other quarters are here received and distributed. In consequence, a town large and important for this planet, where no one who can help it prefers the crowded street to the freedom and expanse of the country, had grown up, with about a hundred and fifty houses, and perhaps a thousand inhabitants. It was so much matter of course that voyagers should disembark to cross the hills or to pursue their journey along the upper part of the river by road, that half-a-dozen different partnerships made it their business to assist in the transfer of passengers and light wares. Ahead of us was a somewhat steep hill-slope, in the lower part of which a wall absolutely perpendicular had been cut by those who pierced the tunnel, the mouth of which was now clearly visible immediately before us. It was about twelve feet in height, and perhaps twenty feet in width. The stream, which, like nearly all Martial rivers, is wide and shallow, had during the last fifty miles of our course grown narrower, with a depth at the same time constantly lessening, so that some care was required on the part of the pilot to avoid running aground. A stream of twenty inches in depth, affording room for two boats to pass abreast, is considered navigable for vessels only carrying passengers; thirty inches are required to afford a course which for heavy freight is preferable to the road. Eveena had taken it for granted that we should disembark here, and it was not till we had come within a hundred yards of the landing-place—where the bank was perpendicular and levelled to a height above the water, which enabled passengers to step directly from the deck of the boat—without slackening our speed, that the possibility of our intending to accompany the boat on its subterranean course occurred to her. As she did not speak, but merely drew closer to me, and held fast my hand, I had no idea of her real distress till we were actually at the mouth of the black and very frightful-looking passage, and the pilot had lighted the electric lamp. As the boat shot under the arch she could not repress a cry of terror. Naturally putting my arm round her at this sign of alarm, I felt that she was trembling violently, and a single look, despite her veil, convinced me that she was crying, though in silence and doing her utmost to conceal her tears.

“Are you so frightened, child?” I asked. “I have been through many subterranean passages, though none so long and dark as this. But you see our lamp lights up not only the boat but the whole vault around and before us, and there can be no danger whatever.”

“I am frightened, though,” she said, “I cannot help it. I never saw anything of the kind before; and the darkness behind and before us, and the black water on either side, do make me shiver.”

“Stop!” I called to the boatman.

“Now, Eveena,” I said, “I do not care to persist in this journey if it really distresses you. I wished to see so wonderful a work of engineering; but, after all, I have been in a much uglier and more

wonderful place, and I can see nothing here stranger than when I was rowed for three-quarters of a mile on the river in the Mammoth Cave. In any case I shall see little but a continuation of what I see already; so if you cannot bear it, we will go back.”

By this time Esmo, who had been in the bows, had joined us, wishing to know why I had stopped the boat.

“This child,” I said, “is not used to travelling, and the tunnel frightens her; so that I think, after all, we had better take the usual course across the mountains.”

“Nonsense!” he answered. “There is no danger here; less probably than in an ordinary drive, certainly less than in a balloon. Don’t spoil her, my friend. If you begin by yielding to so silly a caprice as this, you will end by breaking her heart before the two years are out.”

“Do go on,” whispered Eveena. “I was very silly; I am not so frightened now, and if you will hold me fast, I will not misbehave again.”

Esmo had taken the matter out of my hands, desiring the boatman to proceed; and though I sympathised with my bride’s feminine terror much more than her father appeared to do, I was selfishly anxious, in spite of my declaration that there could be no novelty in this tunnel, to see one thing certainly original—the means by which so narrow and so long a passage could be efficiently ventilated. The least I could do, however, was to appease Eveena’s fear before turning my attention to the objects of my own curiosity. The presence of physical strength, which seemed to her superhuman, produced upon her nerves the quieting effect which, however irrationally, great bodily force always exercises over women; partly, perhaps, from the awe it seems to inspire, partly from a yet more unreasonable but instinctive reliance on its protection even in dangers against which it is obviously unavailing.

Presently a current of air, distinctly warmer than that of the tunnel, which had been gradually increasing in force for some minutes, became so powerful that I could no longer suppose it accidental. Kevimâ being near us, I asked him what it meant.

“Ventilation,” he answered. “The air in these tunnels would be foul and stagnant, perhaps unbreathable, if we did not drive a constant current of air through them. You did not notice, a few yards from the entrance, a wheel which drives a large fan. One of these is placed at every half mile, and drives on the air from one end of the tunnel to the other. They are reversed twice in a zyda, so that they may create no constant counter-current outside.”

“But is not the power exerted to drive so great a body of air exceedingly costly?”

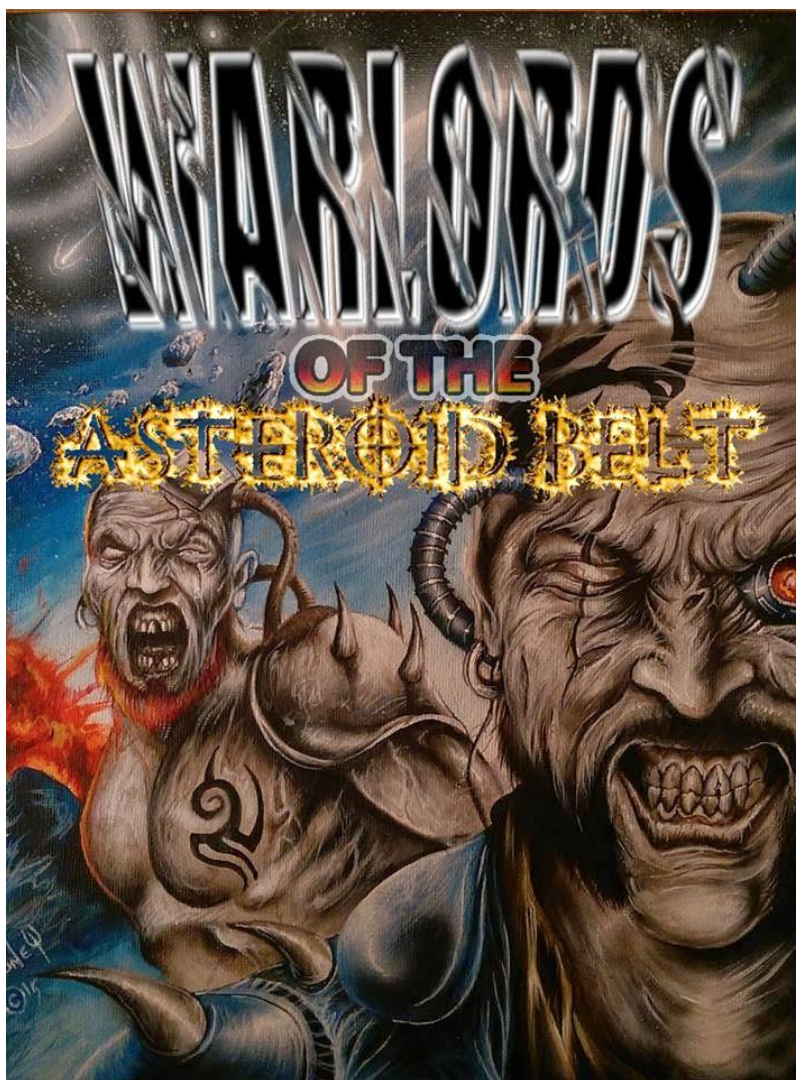
“No,” he answered. “As you are aware, electricity is almost our only motive power, and we calculate that the labour of two men, even without the help of machines, could in their working zyda [eight hours] collect and reduce a sufficient amount of the elements by which the current is created to do the work of four hundred men during a whole day and night.”

“And how long,” I inquired, “has electricity had so complete a monopoly of mechanical work?”

“It was first brought into general use,” he replied, “about eight thousand years ago. Before that, heated air supplied our principal locomotive force, as well as the power of stationary machines wherever no waterfall of sufficient energy was at hand. For several centuries the old powers were still employed under conditions favourable to their use. But we have found electricity so much cheaper than the cheapest of other artificial forces, so much more powerful than any supplied by Nature, that we have long discontinued the employment of any other. Even when we obtain electricity by means of heat, we find that the gain in application more than compensates the loss in the transmutation of one force into another.”

In the course of little more than half an hour we emerged from the tunnel, whose gloom, when once the attraction of novelty was gone, was certainly unpleasant to myself, if not by any means so frightful as Eveena still found it. There was nothing specially attractive or noticeable in the valley through which our course now ran, except the extreme height of its mountain walls, which, though not by any means perpendicular, rose to a height of some 3000 feet so suddenly that to climb their sides would have been absolutely impossible. Only during about two hours in the middle of the day is the sun seen from the level of the stream; and it is dark in the bottom of this valley long before the mist has fallen on the plain outside. We had presently, however, to ascend a slope of some twenty-five feet in the mile, and I was much interested in the peculiar method by which the ascent was made. A mere ascent, not greater than that of some rapids up which American boatmen have managed to carry their barques by manual force, presented no great difficulty; but some skill is required at particular points to avoid being overturned by the rush of the water, and our vessel so careened as to afford much more excuse for Eveena's outbreak of terror than the tunnel had done. Had I not held her fast she must certainly have been thrown overboard, the pilot, used to the danger, having forgotten to warn us. For the rest, in the absence of rocks, the vessel ascended more easily than a powerful steamer, if she could find sufficient depth, could make her way up the rapids of the St. Lawrence or similar streams. We entered the second tunnel without any sign of alarm from Eveena perceptible to others; only her clinging to my hand expressed the fear of which she was ashamed but could not rid herself. Emerging from its mouth, we found ourselves within sight of the sea and of the town and harbour of Serocasfe, where we were next day to embark. Landing from the boat, we were met by the friend whose hospitality Esmo had requested. At his house, half a mile outside the town, for the first time since our marriage I had to part for a short period with Eveena, who was led away by the veiled mistress of the house, while we remained in the entrance chamber or hall. The evening meal was anticipated by two hours, in order that we might attend the meeting at which my bride and I were to receive our formal admission into the Zinta.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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

[Return to Contents](#)

THE WAR OF THE WORLDS by HG Wells

Book One: The Coming of The Martians

Chapter Seventeen: The “Thunder Child”

Had the Martians aimed only at destruction, they might on Monday have annihilated the entire population of London, as it spread itself slowly through the home counties. Not only along the road through Barnet, but also through Edgware and Waltham Abbey, and along the roads eastward to Southend and Shoeburyness, and south of the Thames to Deal and Broadstairs, poured the same frantic rout. If one could have hung that June morning in a balloon in the blazing blue above London every northward and eastward road running out of the tangled maze of streets would have seemed stippled black with the streaming fugitives, each dot a human agony of terror and physical distress. I have set forth at length in the last chapter my brother's account of the road through Chipping Barnet, in order that my readers may realise how that swarming of black dots appeared to one of those concerned. Never before in the history of the world had such a mass of human beings moved and suffered together. The legendary hosts of Goths and Huns, the hugest armies Asia has ever seen, would have been but a drop in that current. And this was no disciplined march; it was a stampede—a stampede gigantic and terrible—without order and without a goal, six million people unarmed and unprovisioned, driving headlong. It was the beginning of the rout of civilisation, of the massacre of mankind.

Directly below him the balloonist would have seen the network of streets far and wide, houses, churches, squares, crescents, gardens—already derelict—spread out like a huge map, and in the southward blotted. Over Ealing, Richmond, Wimbledon, it would have seemed as if some monstrous pen had flung ink upon the chart. Steadily, incessantly, each black splash grew and spread, shooting out ramifications this way and that, now banking itself against rising ground, now pouring swiftly over a crest into a new-found valley, exactly as a gout of ink would spread itself upon blotting paper.

And beyond, over the blue hills that rise southward of the river, the glittering Martians went to and fro, calmly and methodically spreading their poison cloud over this patch of country and then over that, laying it again with their steam jets when it had served its purpose, and taking possession of the conquered country. They do not seem to have aimed at extermination so much as at complete demoralisation and the destruction of any opposition. They exploded any stores of powder they came upon, cut every telegraph, and wrecked the railways here and there. They were hamstringing mankind. They seemed in no hurry to extend the field of their operations, and did not come beyond the central part of London all that day. It is possible that a very considerable number of people in London stuck to their houses through Monday morning. Certain it is that many died at home suffocated by the Black Smoke.

Until about midday the Pool of London was an astonishing scene. Steamboats and shipping of all sorts lay there, tempted by the enormous sums of money offered by fugitives, and it is said that many who swam out to these vessels were thrust off with boathooks and drowned. About one o'clock in the afternoon the thinning remnant of a cloud of the black vapour appeared between the arches of Blackfriars Bridge. At that the Pool became a scene of mad confusion, fighting, and

collision, and for some time a multitude of boats and barges jammed in the northern arch of the Tower Bridge, and the sailors and lightermen had to fight savagely against the people who swarmed upon them from the riverfront. People were actually clambering down the piers of the bridge from above.

When, an hour later, a Martian appeared beyond the Clock Tower and waded down the river, nothing but wreckage floated above Limehouse.

Of the falling of the fifth cylinder I have presently to tell. The sixth star fell at Wimbledon. My brother, keeping watch beside the women in the chaise in a meadow, saw the green flash of it far beyond the hills. On Tuesday the little party, still set upon getting across the sea, made its way through the swarming country towards Colchester. The news that the Martians were now in possession of the whole of London was confirmed. They had been seen at Highgate, and even, it was said, at Neasden. But they did not come into my brother's view until the morrow.

That day the scattered multitudes began to realise the urgent need of provisions. As they grew hungry the rights of property ceased to be regarded. Farmers were out to defend their cattle-sheds, granaries, and ripening root crops with arms in their hands. A number of people now, like my brother, had their faces eastward, and there were some desperate souls even going back towards London to get food. These were chiefly people from the northern suburbs, whose knowledge of the Black Smoke came by hearsay. He heard that about half the members of the government had gathered at Birmingham, and that enormous quantities of high explosives were being prepared to be used in automatic mines across the Midland counties.

He was also told that the Midland Railway Company had replaced the desertions of the first day's panic, had resumed traffic, and was running northward trains from St. Albans to relieve the congestion of the home counties. There was also a placard in Chipping Ongar announcing that large stores of flour were available in the northern towns and that within twenty-four hours bread would be distributed among the starving people in the neighbourhood. But this intelligence did not deter him from the plan of escape he had formed, and the three pressed eastward all day, and heard no more of the bread distribution than this promise. Nor, as a matter of fact, did anyone else hear more of it. That night fell the seventh star, falling upon Primrose Hill. It fell while Miss Elphinstone was watching, for she took that duty alternately with my brother. She saw it.

On Wednesday the three fugitives—they had passed the night in a field of unripe wheat—reached Chelmsford, and there a body of the inhabitants, calling itself the Committee of Public Supply, seized the pony as provisions, and would give nothing in exchange for it but the promise of a share in it the next day. Here there were rumours of Martians at Epping, and news of the destruction of Waltham Abbey Powder Mills in a vain attempt to blow up one of the invaders.

People were watching for Martians here from the church towers. My brother, very luckily for him as it chanced, preferred to push on at once to the coast rather than wait for food, although all three of them were very hungry. By midday they passed through Tillingham, which, strangely enough, seemed to be quite silent and deserted, save for a few furtive plunderers hunting for food. Near Tillingham they suddenly came in sight of the sea, and the most amazing crowd of

shipping of all sorts that it is possible to imagine.

For after the sailors could no longer come up the Thames, they came on to the Essex coast, to Harwich and Walton and Clacton, and afterwards to Foulness and Shoebury, to bring off the people. They lay in a huge sickle-shaped curve that vanished into mist at last towards the Naze. Close inshore was a multitude of fishing smacks—English, Scotch, French, Dutch, and Swedish; steam launches from the Thames, yachts, electric boats; and beyond were ships of large burden, a multitude of filthy colliers, trim merchantmen, cattle ships, passenger boats, petroleum tanks, ocean tramps, an old white transport even, neat white and grey liners from Southampton and Hamburg; and along the blue coast across the Blackwater my brother could make out dimly a dense swarm of boats chaffering with the people on the beach, a swarm which also extended up the Blackwater almost to Maldon.

About a couple of miles out lay an ironclad, very low in the water, almost, to my brother's perception, like a water-logged ship. This was the ram Thunder Child. It was the only warship in sight, but far away to the right over the smooth surface of the sea—for that day there was a dead calm—lay a serpent of black smoke to mark the next ironclads of the Channel Fleet, which hovered in an extended line, steam up and ready for action, across the Thames estuary during the course of the Martian conquest, vigilant and yet powerless to prevent it.

At the sight of the sea, Mrs. Elphinstone, in spite of the assurances of her sister-in-law, gave way to panic. She had never been out of England before, she would rather die than trust herself friendless in a foreign country, and so forth. She seemed, poor woman, to imagine that the French and the Martians might prove very similar. She had been growing increasingly hysterical, fearful, and depressed during the two days' journeyings. Her great idea was to return to Stanmore. Things had been always well and safe at Stanmore. They would find George at Stanmore.

It was with the greatest difficulty they could get her down to the beach, where presently my brother succeeded in attracting the attention of some men on a paddle steamer from the Thames. They sent a boat and drove a bargain for thirty-six pounds for the three. The steamer was going, these men said, to Ostend.

It was about two o'clock when my brother, having paid their fares at the gangway, found himself safely aboard the steamboat with his charges. There was food aboard, albeit at exorbitant prices, and the three of them contrived to eat a meal on one of the seats forward.

There were already a couple of score of passengers aboard, some of whom had expended their last money in securing a passage, but the captain lay off the Blackwater until five in the afternoon, picking up passengers until the seated decks were even dangerously crowded. He would probably have remained longer had it not been for the sound of guns that began about that hour in the south. As if in answer, the ironclad seaward fired a small gun and hoisted a string of flags. A jet of smoke sprang out of her funnels.

Some of the passengers were of opinion that this firing came from Shoeburyness, until it was noticed that it was growing louder. At the same time, far away in the southeast the masts and

upperworks of three ironclads rose one after the other out of the sea, beneath clouds of black smoke. But my brother's attention speedily reverted to the distant firing in the south. He fancied he saw a column of smoke rising out of the distant grey haze.

The little steamer was already flapping her way eastward of the big crescent of shipping, and the low Essex coast was growing blue and hazy, when a Martian appeared, small and faint in the remote distance, advancing along the muddy coast from the direction of Foulness. At that the captain on the bridge swore at the top of his voice with fear and anger at his own delay, and the paddles seemed infected with his terror. Every soul aboard stood at the bulwarks or on the seats of the steamer and stared at that distant shape, higher than the trees or church towers inland, and advancing with a leisurely parody of a human stride.

It was the first Martian my brother had seen, and he stood, more amazed than terrified, watching this Titan advancing deliberately towards the shipping, wading farther and farther into the water as the coast fell away. Then, far away beyond the Crouch, came another, striding over some stunted trees, and then yet another, still farther off, wading deeply through a shiny mudflat that seemed to hang halfway up between sea and sky. They were all stalking seaward, as if to intercept the escape of the multitudinous vessels that were crowded between Foulness and the Naze. In spite of the throbbing exertions of the engines of the little paddle-boat, and the pouring foam that her wheels flung behind her, she receded with terrifying slowness from this ominous advance.

Glancing north-westward, my brother saw the large crescent of shipping already writhing with the approaching terror; one ship passing behind another, another coming round from broadside to end on, steamships whistling and giving off volumes of steam, sails being let out, launches rushing hither and thither. He was so fascinated by this and by the creeping danger away to the left that he had no eyes for anything seaward. And then a swift movement of the steamboat (she had suddenly come round to avoid being run down) flung him headlong from the seat upon which he was standing. There was a shouting all about him, a trampling of feet, and a cheer that seemed to be answered faintly. The steamboat lurched and rolled him over upon his hands.

He sprang to his feet and saw to starboard, and not a hundred yards from their heeling, pitching boat, a vast iron bulk like the blade of a plough tearing through the water, tossing it on either side in huge waves of foam that leaped towards the steamer, flinging her paddles helplessly in the air, and then sucking her deck down almost to the waterline.

A douche of spray blinded my brother for a moment. When his eyes were clear again he saw the monster had passed and was rushing landward. Big iron upperworks rose out of this headlong structure, and from that twin funnels projected and spat a smoking blast shot with fire. It was the torpedo ram, Thunder Child, steaming headlong, coming to the rescue of the threatened shipping.

Keeping his footing on the heaving deck by clutching the bulwarks, my brother looked past this charging leviathan at the Martians again, and he saw the three of them now close together, and standing so far out to sea that their tripod supports were almost entirely submerged. Thus sunken, and seen in remote perspective, they appeared far less formidable than the huge iron bulk in whose wake the steamer was pitching so helplessly. It would seem they were regarding this new

antagonist with astonishment. To their intelligence, it may be, the giant was even such another as themselves. The Thunder Child fired no gun, but simply drove full speed towards them. It was probably her not firing that enabled her to get so near the enemy as she did. They did not know what to make of her. One shell, and they would have sent her to the bottom forthwith with the Heat-Ray.

She was steaming at such a pace that in a minute she seemed halfway between the steamboat and the Martians—a diminishing black bulk against the receding horizontal expanse of the Essex coast.

Suddenly the foremost Martian lowered his tube and discharged a canister of the black gas at the ironclad. It hit her larboard side and glanced off in an inky jet that rolled away to seaward, an unfolding torrent of Black Smoke, from which the ironclad drove clear. To the watchers from the steamer, low in the water and with the sun in their eyes, it seemed as though she were already among the Martians.

They saw the gaunt figures separating and rising out of the water as they retreated shoreward, and one of them raised the camera-like generator of the Heat-Ray. He held it pointing obliquely downward, and a bank of steam sprang from the water at its touch. It must have driven through the iron of the ship's side like a white-hot iron rod through paper.

A flicker of flame went up through the rising steam, and then the Martian reeled and staggered. In another moment he was cut down, and a great body of water and steam shot high in the air. The guns of the Thunder Child sounded through the reek, going off one after the other, and one shot splashed the water high close by the steamer, ricocheted towards the other flying ships to the north, and smashed a smack to matchwood.

But no one heeded that very much. At the sight of the Martian's collapse the captain on the bridge yelled inarticulately, and all the crowding passengers on the steamer's stern shouted together. And then they yelled again. For, surging out beyond the white tumult, drove something long and black, the flames streaming from its middle parts, its ventilators and funnels spouting fire.

She was alive still; the steering gear, it seems, was intact and her engines working. She headed straight for a second Martian, and was within a hundred yards of him when the Heat-Ray came to bear. Then with a violent thud, a blinding flash, her decks, her funnels, leaped upward. The Martian staggered with the violence of her explosion, and in another moment the flaming wreckage, still driving forward with the impetus of its pace, had struck him and crumpled him up like a thing of cardboard. My brother shouted involuntarily. A boiling tumult of steam hid everything again.

“Two!” yelled the captain.

Everyone was shouting. The whole steamer from end to end rang with frantic cheering that was taken up first by one and then by all in the crowding multitude of ships and boats that was driving out to sea.

The steam hung upon the water for many minutes, hiding the third Martian and the coast altogether. And all this time the boat was paddling steadily out to sea and away from the fight; and when at last the confusion cleared, the drifting bank of black vapour intervened, and nothing of the Thunder Child could be made out, nor could the third Martian be seen. But the ironclads to seaward were now quite close and standing in towards shore past the steamboat.

The little vessel continued to beat its way seaward, and the ironclads receded slowly towards the coast, which was hidden still by a marbled bank of vapour, part steam, part black gas, eddying and combining in the strangest way. The fleet of refugees was scattering to the northeast; several smacks were sailing between the ironclads and the steamboat. After a time, and before they reached the sinking cloud bank, the warships turned northward, and then abruptly went about and passed into the thickening haze of evening southward. The coast grew faint, and at last indistinguishable amid the low banks of clouds that were gathering about the sinking sun.

Then suddenly out of the golden haze of the sunset came the vibration of guns, and a form of black shadows moving. Everyone struggled to the rail of the steamer and peered into the blinding furnace of the west, but nothing was to be distinguished clearly. A mass of smoke rose slanting and barred the face of the sun. The steamboat throbbed on its way through an interminable suspense.

The sun sank into grey clouds, the sky flushed and darkened, the evening star trembled into sight. It was deep twilight when the captain cried out and pointed. My brother strained his eyes. Something rushed up into the sky out of the greyness—rushed slantingly upward and very swiftly into the luminous clearness above the clouds in the western sky; something flat and broad, and very large, that swept round in a vast curve, grew smaller, sank slowly, and vanished again into the grey mystery of the night. And as it flew it rained down darkness upon the land.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)