

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

**VOL. 12, ISSUE 15
24TH-31ST
DECEMBER 2017**

OUT WENT THE CANDLE

**BY MS SWIFT
THE THING IN THE
TOWER...**

DEATH IN A BOTTLE

**BY ALEX S
JOHNSON
HEY, ARE WE
DEAD?**

THE COST OF GREED BY STEVEN HAVELOCK

ANOTHER NATIVITY BY STEVE LAKER

WWW.SCHLOCK.CO.UK

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by
Gavin Chappell

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

Schlock! Webzine
*Copyright © 2017 by Gavin Chappell, C Priest Brumley, John C Adams, Alex S Johnson,
Gregory KH Bryant, GK Murphy, HG Wells, Steve Laker*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 12, Issue 15
24th-31st December 2017

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 Kramopus_a_Sesto_01 by [Llorenzi](#). All images within licensed under Creative Commons Attribution Share Alike 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons, unless otherwise indicated. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

EDITORIAL

OUT WENT THE CANDLE by MS Swift—*The thing in the tower...* GHOST HORROR

DEATH IN A BOTTLE by Alex S Johnson—*Hey, are we dead?* HORROR

ANOTHER NATIVITY by Steve Laker—*Cannibalism by self-flagellation...* HORROR

THE COST OF GREED by Steven Havelock—*Silver shoes...* FANTASY HORROR

CONFLICT OF WITCHES Part One of Two by GK Murphy—*I'll butcher your family...*

HORROR

SCHLOCK! REVIEW by John C Adams—*Teatro Grottesco by Thomas Ligotti...* ARTICLE

THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO Episode Thirty-Nine by Gregory KH Bryant—*Rebuilding...*

SCIENCE FICTION

THE WAR OF THE WORLDS Book One: Chapter Four by HG Wells—*The Cylinder Opens...* SCIENCE FICTION CLASSIC

EDITORIAL

In this festive two-week edition (even editors have holidays), we have a chilling ghost story set in a creepy castle on the Welsh Marches from MS Swift, while Alex S Johnson presents us with the gift of *Death in a Bottle*. Steve Laker gets into the Yuletide spirit with a ruthless, uncompromising deconstruction of immaculate conception, and Steven Havelock shares with us a moral tale of greed and Leprechauns fit to have Dickens shaking in his slippers.

GK Murphy is back with the first in a two-parter (concludes in the New Year) of occult feuding. John C Adams reviews Thomas Ligotti's *Teatro Grottesco*. Out there on Callisto, the victorious colonists rebuild their shattered world. And down in suburban England, the Martian cylinder is slowly opening...

Look forward to more madness and mayhem next year. And a heartfelt chorus of *Bah humbug!* to thee and thine.

—Gavin Chappell

Now Available from Rogue Planet Press:

[Lovecraftiana Halloween 2017](#)



[Return to Contents](#)

OUT WENT THE CANDLE by MS Swift

Absolute, all-consuming terror locked me onto the staircase winding around the inner wall of the tower. The sense that Ed was also unable to move increased my distress. It was not the failure of the lights which had panicked me; nor was it the sheer drop on the right-hand side or the sense that the guide rope had vanished and that only the stairs beneath each foot prevented me from falling to the stone floor below. What panicked me was the sense that we were not alone.

When we had first entered, I had an uneasy sense that someone else was in the building and I kept glancing up the stairs expecting a figure to be looking down at us. That feeling intensified as we ascended until I was convinced something within the blank reach of the tower's shaft regarded us with a vast, predatory gaze. I could not comprehend what this presence was. It may have been the tower itself, or the darkness which lay permanently within its stone shell. All that mattered was that it wished us harm.

The staircase that wound up the hundred or so feet of the north tower of Carroug Castle was open on the right-hand side. With only a rope chained to the wall it was enough of a liability for the Castle authorities to keep that part of the site closed. Many of the flags on the ground floor had also fallen away into the cellars below, which were themselves pitted with cracks and fissures that supposedly dropped into a chasm gouged into the hillside. The stairs led nowhere, stopping just short of the remnants of the roof.

Not that any visitors ever tried to climb the tower. Although it was visible throughout the site there was no way for the public to reach it: the battlements had crumbled away on each side of it so that it stood alone atop a steep bluff; and now it could only be accessed through a tall, metal gate that was kept locked at all times.

I was indifferent when Ed first described the architectural peculiarities of this tower. However, my interest was piqued when he suggested that the real reason it was shut off was not on grounds of safety but because it was not entirely uninhabited—that there was a sense of something there that was always watching, always waiting for any who might venture into its shell.

Two years had passed since I had last seen my old university friend, and when he invited me to the castle on the Welsh Marches where he was serving an apprenticeship I eagerly accepted. It was eight o'clock when I pulled up and the site had been closed for two hours. The late summer sun hung over the far, blue hills silhouetting their defiant Welsh contours and side lighting in warm gold the castle's four towers and the huge trees whispering beyond.

It was good to catch up over a couple of beers among the ancient stones while the rooks winged their way back to their beechen roosts. When we toured the site, Ed went on about the castle walls, the four towers, the bailey with the twelfth century keep. Such matter washed over me until he got onto the lurid details about the Norman lord with his rumoured torture cellar or the Bronze Age finds that included fragments of human skull and—above all—the rumours about the tower. As the tales about it unfolded—the panic it would strike into

people, the suicides who had thrown themselves down its stairs, the lady murdered there long ago and the story that it stood, perhaps, over a well where the English victims of Norman wrath were hurled—I found myself staring at the tall, thin shell.

It only took a couple of tequilas in Ed's on-site flat and the discovery that he lived without a TV for me to agree to climb the tower. He had been in once himself during the daytime and I could tell he wanted to explore the structure properly.

Before we set off, Ed found the heavy-duty torch in his flat and gathered together a number of small lanterns and tea lights from the gift shop whilst I rummaged for the torch in the glove compartment of my car. The night was fresh and being so far from any town it seemed the utmost depths of the sky were alight with stars. There was no sense of threat as we passed under the vast outer gate house. Our torches picked out looming fragments of wall, traces of an arch and the battlements of the curtain wall, while over all, the northern tower loomed lone and thin. Even when Ed unlocked the gate to the tower and we ascended the rocky slope to its ancient wooden door, neither of us questioned what we were about to do. It was only when that door whined ajar that I felt a flicker of fear and sensed that there was someone in the tower.

The dark within was intense and the air stale. Although the roof was partly open I could not make out the night sky through it. Ed paused scanning his torch across the wall and to my surprise flicked a light switch. For a moment there was nothing and then an irritated buzzing presaged a sudden flicker of light some way above us.

'The bit that's lit is the weirdest thing, it's like a tunnel built around the stairs. There may have been a floor there at one time.'

I don't know why Ed whispered as his torch picked out a section of wall which enclosed the steps for a half rotation of the tower. As he lowered his torch again, the light thrown from the enclosed section glinted on and off like an eye blinking through the dark.

Once, a few years back, I went to Thailand. The heat seemed to grab you as you stepped off the plane. Stepping into the tower reminded of that experience. The air was heavy and cold rather than hot but it was like we had stepped into a different ecosystem. For an open-air structure on the Welsh Marches it was unusually dry. In fact, it was so dry that my throat became irritated and I found myself repeatedly swallowing. It was like the building was leached of moisture. My limbs dragged and I noticed that Ed moved more slowly, fumbling as he lit the tea lights. Once they were ready, we were each able to hold three lantern handles and a torch in the right hand, leaving the left free for balance as we picked our way across the uneven ground.

Wordlessly, Ed left a lantern on the first step and climbed beyond it. He deposited a second some fifteen steps later, and when I glanced back, still thinking that I might glimpse someone in the gloom, there was something comforting about those wavering lights that marked the way back through the blankness. The tunnel light blinked off and fizzed on, a strobe effect that wafted the darkness around us before drawing it back again; when it was on it, emphasised the vastness of the place and when it failed, the steps before us became a frontier against the darkness.

The crisp air was not disturbed by any draught and when I imagined the occasional faint caress across my exposed skin, I wondered if bats or moths were flitting around. The tower was probably clogged with cobwebs but no matter how I rationalised it, I could not counter the growing sense that something was about to close upon us, that its breath would break at the back of my neck, or that its outstretched hand would suddenly close around me. I thought too that I could hear something. Both of us now laboured up the stairs and our breathing was heavy; perhaps each gasp was echoed by the stone heights or maybe gusts of wind were funnelled down the tunnel and floated around us in abrupt, whispered snatches.

I knew Ed was also uneasy; he stopped once and flicked his torch around, scanning the empty walls and stairs below. I was depositing my lanterns by that point so we now had a chain that spiralled down back to the floor below.

‘...always watching, waiting...’

Ed’s words took hold in my head and were it not for those tiny lights, I would have felt that each time the light above died we were somewhere vaster than a crumbling tower; even when it fizzed and rallied, tracing the upper reaches of the structure, the darkness was only contracted and tensed, ready to snap back around us again.

Once the last of the lanterns had been left, we were in view of the tunnel. Its interior of curved stone and steep, smooth steps climbing around the tower wall was momentarily illuminated until there was a hum and blackness came; it seemed to fling itself against me, dropping withered, cold roots into my gut.

‘...always waiting...’

I tried to dispel the words but found myself wondering if the tower, or the blankness harboured within it, was watching for the first foot to slide on the smooth steps, the first ankle to twist and give; if it was willing us to topple over the steps.

I was stealing myself to speak when I realised that Ed’s torch was fading. I could see his worried glance as he checked the bulb. It dimmed quickly, very quickly, until—along with my own torch—it suddenly died.

Only the spiral of lanterns holding the flickering tea lights remained. We stood, each about to indicate it was time to go back down through that whispering, moving, watching darkness when, as one, the lanterns were snuffed out.

There was no draught; there was no flurry of sudden rain. They all just died at once.

‘This is what it was waiting for, now it’s coming closer, watching us...’ I found myself thinking.

A darkness of a different order seemed to close in upon us; darkness pregnant with a presence or a host of presences, all hostile and regarding these two men suspended in their lair. I was convinced that they, whatever they were, now hung at my shoulder, that they drew down through the air to hang above me; that they whispered about us or to us, telling us to fall, or jump...

‘There is no stair, there is no drop, we are already falling, it is the rush of air that drags against us...’ Even my thoughts were no longer my own. The darkness was not an absence of light; it was an active negation of the world, nothing else existed but the two of us and that presence.

I felt Ed’s arm move, there was a beep and his phone came to life. His face was half formed in the stark light of the console. I was unable to turn at first, dreading what might be behind me and fearing that I might lose my place on the steps but as Ed pressed close, the hand with the dead torch and phone hooked over my shoulder, I was able to manoeuvre myself about and face downward. I slipped my torch into my coat pocket and retrieved my phone. I selected the torch function and several stairs came into definition. I tried to speak but my voice had gone so I stepped tentatively down, Ed pressing close behind me.

The first few steps were agony. My legs felt like they were seized with cramp and my lungs laboured; cold had seeped into my bones and I could not stop a shudder taking hold of me, but together, we slowly eased our way down to the unseen floor below. Ed made a rasping sound at one point and suddenly pressed into me, nearly sending me off the stairs altogether. I pulled up, still trembling, and I felt his left hand take hold of my shoulder. His proximity kept at bay the horror of whatever was with us in that tower. When we felt the air become a little fresher, the light suddenly flickered on above us and the floor came into view only a dozen or so stairs away. The light died instantly along with each phone. The blankness was so intense that it might have choked us in its density. Certainly my breath failed and I had lost all sense of my limbs when Ed lurched into me and there was a panicked, downward rush. My feet slapped against steps that fell away beneath them and then there was a collapse onto dry, unyielding stone and Ed’s body rolled across mine. My left hand still clutched my phone and life returned to the device as the camera flashed; the stark glare burst back from softened steps, plunged into the pitted stonework and stretched into the expanse above. I did not have time to register anything else in the shaft of the tower as the outline of the door was evident and although my body screamed, I slithered after Ed toward the softer gloom of the night.

Back at Ed’s flat we nestled onto comfy chairs and draped throws across our aching bodies. I still shook with a combination of terror and cold and I welcomed the tequila that Ed eventually poured out.

‘I was pushed,’ Ed said, ‘you know when we fell just before we got out, I felt something big, something heavy shove me in the back.’

I did not answer and we drank more. Eventually the liquor revived me and I showed Ed the picture on the camera. It was possible to see the stairs curving upwards along with several blurs in the space around them. I told Ed that when I was holding the rope it felt like really the tower had been holding onto me and he repeated that he had been pushed.

It was probably a combination of the drink, the well lit flat and the music on the tinny CD player that helped detach us from the dread we had felt. My own terror had subsided into a flurry of nervous adrenalin and I found myself agreeing when Ed said, ‘There was something there and it reached out to me but it didn’t hurt us; we’ve both got phones, I’ve got a camera somewhere; let’s go back, let’s get proof...I noticed that there are a couple of brackets

hanging above the tunnel, we could suspend a sheet from them...' Ed said, thinking aloud, 'if I was pushed, would the same force disturb the fabric? We can film anything that moves the sheet...'

This made sense to me and I found myself excitedly agreeing—we had climbed the stairs once—we could do it again! We donned extra layers, changed the batteries in the torches, checked the phones and found them working and grabbed more lanterns from the gift shop below the flat. Ed packed a sheet into his small rucksack, I stashed the tequila into my coat pocket and away we went.

Doubt set in the moment we began negotiating the site. A wind had risen; keening through the remnants of wall and over all, the northern tower loomed. We had left the outer gate and door to the tower unlocked and Ed made a point of propping each open with a rock. He then turned to me and said, 'Will you film me, now?'

I obliged, using the phone to record his spiel about the horrors we were trying to capture on film. He probably imagined this appearing on TV but he looked drunk as he spoke into the camera and despite the uneasy atmosphere, I couldn't help laughing at him.

'Just film everything in there, okay?' he said after he had made a cutting motion with his hand.

The presence enveloped us from the moment we entered the building. The cold assailed me and I noticed Ed shiver too; I felt also the parching aridity and found myself swallowing again. The light was on and as we crossed to the stairs, Ed waved something away. I angled the phone upward, hoping it might capture the whispers and groans which seemed to shiver through the upper reaches of the shaft.

It took time to light the new lanterns. The lighters kept failing and it needed several attempts before the tea lights flamed. Once all were lit, we tentatively made our way to the stairs. As soon as Ed set foot on the first step, the tunnel light failed and he hunched into his coat as if walking into a driving wind. When he deposited the second lantern, the precariousness of our position took hold of me. I felt more keenly than before how a foot of slippery stone was all that suspended us above the abyss. Ed paused, his fingers readjusting on the rope and I swigged tequila; its numbing bubble settled the dread that was creeping upon me again. I had begun to leave my lanterns when the dread came over me once more. The tunnel light died again and a cloud of faint movements tickled the back of my neck.

'Always falling, waiting...'

My legs slowed. It was as if water washed against me, slowing me, dragging at me. To our right, the darkness seemed to be moving like something vast was swimming toward us through the deepest of seas. The tunnel light blinked on and off repeatedly now and thoughts that were not my own lodged in my head:

'Watching, always dragging, closer...'

I expected at any minute to be shoved down into the gulf but somehow I managed to deposit the last lantern and swig more tequila. Suddenly, Ed stopped and the tunnel opened before us; his torch flashed up the steep curve of stairs to the point where they vanished out of sight. I

drank again and passed him the bottle before we dragged the sheet up onto the brackets in the wall. Ed had thought to bring a handful of pebbles to weigh it down. Once done, the fabric hung almost taut across the mouth of the tunnel. We moved down a couple of steps, each of us holding a torch and a phone. Below, the six lights winked through the darkness. On the periphery of the light, the blank gulf seemed to be moving, coiling and rotating through the tower's shaft and I pressed myself against the cold wall.

‘...watching...always...falling...’

Ed didn't notice the first of the lanterns go out. I happened to be looking down and couldn't tell whether it burnt still. I continued to look down and when the second was extinguished, I shook Ed's coat. The tunnel light died at that moment and I knew that the malevolence was rising toward us. Last time it had descended, this time it rose, trapping us.

Ed's phone clicked and the flash illuminated the walls below and the bottle as it slipped from his hands. The electric light returned, illuminating the bottle turning once, the liquor flooding from bottom to top, and then it was gone, down into blankness. I did not hear it smash.

The third and fourth lights were now extinguished. A whispering was audible too, rising in flurries before ceasing abruptly. Ed nudged me and I turned, struggling to breathe. The tunnel light returned illuminating a defined and specific probing movement in the centre of the sheet. Despite my dread at what was approaching, I was able to film it with my camera. The protuberance dropped back once, rattling the stones, and then returned immediately and in a more pronounced fashion. I leaned forward, pressing my phone as closely as I could to the sheet. It was protruding four inches or more, yet there was nothing visible that could cause it: only the stairs were evident, winding up the wall.

The sheet fell back—it was like an elongated finger had been withdrawn from it. The tunnel light blinked off again and Ed's torch beamed through the fabric. There was no evidence of any person behind it. There was a fizz and the light returned, flaring across us and then it failed instantly. Ed's torch picked out a sudden, fraught disturbance of the sheet before protuberances appeared all over it. The brackets creaked and a couple of pebbles scattered and then it seemed many hands strained toward us through that fabric.

I drew back, keeping my phone angled toward the mass of lumps probing the sheet. The tunnel light returned and again the sheet relaxed. Moments passed and the sheet was slowly drawn backward before it was sucked up into the tunnel, sending the pebbles over the edge. The sheet was held taut, as if suspended within a giant mouth, and still no shadows were cast by the electric light or Ed's torch.

The thrust between light and dark played out several more times before the tunnel light failed completely and Ed's torch revealed the sheet swaying from side to side and then swelling forwards with shapes like long limbs or huge, jutting teeth, working at the fabric. I had been mesmerised by the sight but that was the moment that I turned to flee; the last of the lanterns was now gone and whatever was extinguishing them would be upon us. I glanced back to see Ed's torch propelled from his hand up into the shaft before something snuffed it out completely. At that point, all sense of who we were collapsed into panicked flight. Steps flew beneath our feet, several at a time. Thick, arid blankness dragged around us whilst fragments of what may have been fabric whipped at our backs.

The steps underfoot seemed to fold away but somehow we survived our descent and made it to the door. We ran through the warm night air. Ed bolted both the lower and upper doors of the flat whilst I dragged the curtains shut. Once all available lights were on, we sank onto the sofa, scratched and bleeding. We sat in silence. Neither of us felt inclined to check what we had filmed. Although there was beer in the fridge and weed on the coffee table, I did not care for either and it was some time before I lit a cigarette.

‘Did you hear it, in the tower?’ Ed eventually asked.

‘I don’t know what I heard and what I imagined,’ I replied.

‘I heard breathing—a raspy, dragging breathing.’

I did not reply.

‘I can hear it now. Outside. I can hear it and there is a flapping sound, like bits of the sheet against the walls.’

I listened but could only hear the wind, ‘As long as it’s outside it can’t get in.’

Time passed. I might have slept. Either way, I had become aware of a strange effect in the room. The curtains over the window seemed to be lengthening and expanding to fill the wall whilst their pattern of orange sunflowers was darkening. When I looked up properly, I saw that they were being lifted by something behind them. I slapped at Ed and struggled to my feet. The curtains were being pushed slowly out and where they parted before absolute blackness.

I found myself beginning to shake again and on impulse I grabbed the nearest item and launched it. The ash tray smashed, scattering glass and ash across the windows. Thankfully the curtains sank back until they resumed their normal size and colour. I stood, unable to move toward them.

Ed muttered something in his sleep. The flat had become really cold and all the lights seemed to have dimmed. Ed muttered something again and then the throw on the armchair was plucked up by unseen hands and rose slowly until it was suspended in the air. I looked on in horror as the fabric was prodded from behind and then suddenly sucked backward.

My cry must have woken Ed as he followed me out of the room. I fumbled with the lock and then we were down the stairs and out into the staff parking bay. Thank God, the keys were still in the car and we could throw ourselves in and swing out of the place. I was in no state to drive, my feet and ankles complained every time I touched the pedals, but I could not stay in that place a moment longer.

The headlights highlighted the driveway and the large, open gates of the site before the hedgerows of the lane raced by. Ed fiddled with the radio but he could not find any reception.

‘What time is it?’ he asked.

The dashboard clock read 1.13. That can't have been right—it was one when we first went into the tower. The lanes twisted around us. I had no idea where we were and eventually I pulled in by a gateway into a field.

We sat in the car. It was good to be away from that tower but I felt numb, like I'd been hollowed out. It was still cold and there was no sign of the dawn even when I opened the door and cautiously stepped out of the car. I shivered, got back in and searched in vain for a drink. My throat and mouth were so dry I could hardly swallow.

We are still in the car. The sky seems to have darkened further and there is still no reception on the radio. I sense movement next to me and glance across at Ed. Something is happening to him. He is in shadow and it seems he is shivering and floating away. I try and reach out toward him but he is suddenly far away and expanding; his clothes and body are gently peeling away, uncoiling across an outpouring of darkness. I watch in horror, forced to witness the remains of Ed—strips of fabric and pale skin and hair—hang before me like a shredded drape suspended in the air. I cannot understand what is happening but I can see this sheet now rising as if pushed from behind. As it lifts, the sea of blankness wells toward me. The car has gone and the shadow which has taken Ed is now hanging all around me, enclosing me, like I am in the tower again. I sense a presence, a malicious presence, focused intently upon me as the last traces of Ed sink within its depths. The blankness contracts, closing upon me; it exudes an intense cold and a dry, dusty quality which saps whatever moisture remains in my body.

It slips around me like oil, clinging to me, caressing me. I try turning away but it fills my eyes, floods my mouth. There is nothing now but this. All withers before its total silence and stillness; I have no choice but to surrender to it. I tell myself there can be no more flight and it is a relief to let myself go and fall willingly into that which has been watching me, which has been waiting for me. There is a fleeting, joyous rush into something boundless before everything is snuffed out like candle light.

M. S. Swift's most recent work has appeared in the anthology 'Shopping List' from Hellbound Books <http://hellboundbookspublishing.com/shopping1.html>

THE END

[Available from Rogue Planet Press](#)

AUTUMN 2017

Schlock!

Quarterly

A Halloween
Celebration of
the works of
EDGAR
ALLAN
POE

**ELEVEN CLASSIC
TALES OF MYSTERY
AND TERROR**

ILLUSTRATED

BY
GREGORY KH
BRYANT

Plus Essays
and Poems from
Sandro D.
Fossemò



[Return to Contents](#)

DEATH IN A BOTTLE by Alex S Johnson

“Have you ever had death in a bottle?”

“Upper case or lower?” Stu asked Norton. He had a feeling Norton was speaking in the lower case, but he wanted to hear that from the horse’s mouth, explicitly. Stu still had his green Crotchgrabber pyjamas on, piles of long blond hair mashed to his face with unknown stickiness. They sat side by side on the cherry red living room couch. From the stereo, Rob Halford was shrieking about “total genocide.” Then the CD came to an end.

“I was just feeling you out,” said Norton in the sudden silence. Hair sleeked down to a spray of dark stubble, eyes magnified threefold by his horn-rimmed glasses, he wore a grey track suit and bunny slippers with tongues that rolled out on a spring and lever mechanism whenever he moved. The pause that ensued might have been uncomfortable had it lasted more than 15 seconds, but 15 seconds came and went, only one drop of (50% shared) sweat rolled, and its cause wasn’t discomfort but actual heat.

After all, Stuart and Norton were pals. Besties. BFF’s. They’d weathered storms together, forged forward side by side against a battery of flesh eating blobs, ground out a powder in the nick of time before the tomb rock descended at the signal of the Pale Messiah (aka Goober Nutwitz) and moreover, it might be said, never once flinched when a team of rocket surgeons infected them with a nano-bug that briefly turned them into the two-headed terror Franz Kafka Returns and All Bets are Off, Fools. The kind of pals that shared everything, even ideas and actual behaviour which contradicted all known rules of civilization, plus a few rarely invoked.

They let the question ring in the air, savoured the ambiguity. Stu watched the toad in the corner, who had begun as a pet but became, over time, the moral centre of the household. The toad met Stu’s eyes with his own implacable orbits, and they communicated—a short message, perhaps, but what Stu learned stunned him.

“The toad says...” he began.

Norton raised a hand. “I know, man. You need to clean out his tank.”

“That was only part of it.”

“It’s the part that counts.”

Stu shook his head. He had to disagree on this one.

Norton walked to the kitchen, where gurgling, grinding and flushing sounds resounded. A short time later he returned with a tall green bottle. Hand written on the label in bold, block letters were the words “Death in a Bottle.”

“Okay, I admit, I was being equivocal. The ambiguity arose from the difference between the generic death in a bottle, which could encompass everything from tequila to gin and moonshine to actual poison, and a literal product name. Here, though, the question begins anew, because as you see, I have clearly labelled this drink ‘Death in a Bottle,’ with capital letters.”

“And your point being? The toad says...”

Norton snorted. “Stop it with the toad says, or I’ll start with what Simon says, and Simon these days is a nasty motherforker.”

“Dammit, you always ruin my moment,” said Stu.

“Look, I’m sorry...I’m sorry I barked at you,” said Norton. “Shall we start again?”

“Okay, and hey, we can always do this away from the toad.”

“Toad’s gonna know,” said Norton.

“Because Toad has the key to actual death and the post mortem slog to enlightenment.”

“That’s one way of looking at it,” said Norton. He popped the cork from the green bottle and handed it to Stuart. “Take a hit?”

“Will this kill me, only make me stronger, or...”

“You’re playing it way, way too binary,” said Norton. “Ours is not to reason why. Ours is but to taste...and who knows, my friend, that taste may be zestful and pleasing to the tongue. Or, it may sting. It may be soft and generous and yielding, or whip our nerves to a frenzy. All of these possibilities and more await he who drinks from the font of DIAB.”

Stuart gulped. “That sounds wicked, man.”

“As in, ‘diabolical?’ Maybe. But I didn’t intend it that way.”

They sat.

The burden of time grew excessive. Norton was reminded of Charles Baudelaire. Stuart thought of the Pale Messiah, and the promise extended. Then he thought about baseball. Then he looked at his fingers and realized he needed to trim his nails. Stuart finally seized the bottle. He examined it closely, and gasped.

“Dude, have you seen what’s in here?” He held it up to the light streaming in from the front window of their one-bedroom apartment.

“Of course, I’ve...” but Norton sounded unsure. “What, did you find some nog at the bottom? That sometimes happens. The guy I get it from prepares it blindfolded. I don’t know why he does it that way, he just does. That was how he received the recipe from the one that preceded him, back down the line, until the ancestral divide was multiply folded and all bets were off.”

“Fair enough,” said Stuart. “I’m sure we all have such moments in our personal history. But that’s not what I’m getting at. It goes way, way beyond some random nog. I’m talking a combination of archetypes and sludge I’ve never seen before.”

“Are you actually mad, Stuart Brigand Adolphsen?” asked Norton.

“Wow, you sound like my mom. That’s wrong on so many levels. Anyway, whether I’m actually mad or just play it on TV, you really need to see this.” They sat together as the sunshine tickled them through the slight part in the curtains.

They looked closer, and it was all there.

Outrageously sordid and messy. Sludge that beggared description. Clusters of dozens of tiny skulls in all colours, of course. Vampires, werewolves, ghouls, clans of necrophiles that stretched back centuries. An excessively long alleyway in which hung stagnant clouds of blue smoke, spattered by the reflection of a neon sign: “Cthulhu’s Tavern.” An octopoid creature with a grille of tentacles for a mouth peeked furtively from the inn, regarded the reader with a lazy fourth wall blasting “whatever” and slid inside to cheers and cries for “extra sodomy.”

Stuart tilted the bottle and more weird shit slid out. Radiated bugs. Fires of unknown origin. A toy baby. A real baby with glowing green eyes. A partially faked cherub sitting atop the gruesome remains of a RealityHacker turned hooker razed by the Ripper in Black. Ghastly revenants holding charts before them that spelled out in the cold language of mathematics the bittersweet dance of modern economics. A bloodsucker led the dance.

“Bottoms up,” said Norton.

“Cheers, man.”

They drank.

Nothing happened for a while. Until...

“Knock-knock...”

“Was that you, man? Hey, are we dead?”

Norton shrugged. “Not sure. It affects everybody who drinks it in a different way. What...it wasn’t you?”

“Yeah, I think we’re still alive. No, wasn’t me, man. Hey, maybe it’s our landlord.”

Stuart laughed. The two friends were now sitting on the beige carpet, their brains turned inside out by the hundred thousand stops on the train past life.

“If we give him a sip, do you think he’ll give us a break on the rent?”

“Yeah, man, it might kill him.”

“I’ll miss the knock-knock jokes.”

“Yeah, me too.”

And so they drank from the bottle. They drank with and without the landlord, till time stuttered and ground out like a hastily stubbed cigarette, reignited but with a sour taste, past all endurable peaks and valleys of tension and break, break and tension, building, zooming in, taking out, ratifying treaties, ending terror in a cloud of vapour through a window of green bottle glass, and throughout, knowing with a certainty that never will be greater the difference between words, their meanings, a liquid, the rental agreement and what a landlord could be persuaded to do under circumstances of suspended lifedeath.

THE END

[Schlock! Presents: Ghostlands](#)

Ghostlands



A Book of Ghost Stories

[Return to Contents](#)

ANOTHER NATIVITY by Steve Laker

Another year, another end of term, and another Christmas. A different group of children, at another school, and another nativity...

“Why are they doing the nativity at a secondary school? It’s a primary school thing, surely.”

“It’s art, apparently.”

“It’s bollocks.”

“Well, it says here, *A modern artistic twist is given to the well-loved story of Mary and Joseph finding shelter at Christmas, so that they may have their boy child, born of the Lord.*”

“Like I said then, bollocks.”

“Actually, I’ve heard of the writer they drafted in. I’ve got a feeling this might be a bit different. And besides, it’s our fucking daughter.”

“Oh, does she still live here?”

“Yes, I know.”

“She’s fucking twelve. Where is Maz anyway?”

“She’s at the school. There’s food.”

“Oh, that’s a clincher then...”

Parents, guardians, family and friends, welcome to our production of Another Nativity for the stage.

The following is a true story, a Christmas message, adapted from the bible...

Act I

It was the old school cheap props method of a cushion up her jumper which made Marilyn feel so secure on stage. She was pregnant. She couldn’t make out her father in the audience. This was a nativity, nothing else.

The stomach cramps were stage fright, only that. The audience out there really cared. She could get over this and speak her lines, after so many weeks of rehearsal. It was just a nativity. A man speaks:

“Marilyn, we’re here to tell a story and we need your help. You are welcome here. Tell us first, how you came to be here.”

“Joe and me have been walking for three days. We’re homeless because my dad chucked us out. As you can see, I’m pregnant. We came here for the health care and to register the birth.”

“How did you come to be with child?”

“I was raped.”

“By whom, Marilyn?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see him.”

“The child is not your partner’s?”

“No.”

“No. Thank you, Marilyn. To spare you further questions for now, I will refer to the statement which you made previously under oath.

“You suspected that you were pregnant because you’d missed a period, so you took a test. The test was positive. You thought little of it, hoping that the test was incorrect or that the problem would go away. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“You met Joe around two weeks after this, and a month into the relationship, you had unprotected sexual intercourse for the first time. Your hymen was ruptured and you bled. Is this right? Is this what you said?”

“Yes.”

“Confused, you thought that this might be your existing pregnancy miscarrying, so you took another pregnancy test immediately after that first sexual encounter: it too was positive. Correct?”

“Yes.”

“It was too soon after you’d had intercourse with Joe for his sperm to have penetrated any eggs in your womb, yet he had clearly taken your virginity. Therefore, it would seem that you’d been pregnant and a virgin at the same time.

“I should like to call on Doctor Bateman. Doctor: you have examined the patient. Can you confirm the stage of her pregnancy?”

“Yes, your honour. Based on the current size and development of the foetus, the patient is 20 weeks pregnant. This would place the date of conception several weeks prior to her first sexual encounter with her current partner.

“Of course, the hymen can become ruptured in many ways besides intercourse. It is possible to be a virgin whilst not having an intact hymen but it is impossible to become pregnant with the hymen intact. I wish to hand you over to Inspector Aldred.”

“Thank you, doctor. Your honour: the doctor is of course correct in her statement. Our priority was to identify the father of the child. The claimant’s partner had volunteered for a

DNA swab. Clearly we also needed the DNA of the mother and baby. This was gained with consent. I can confirm that the claimant's partner is not the father of the unborn child. Furthermore, the unborn child's DNA is identical to that of the mother."

"Which suggests a number of things, Inspector."

"Yes, your honour. We can discount accidental insemination through heavy petting, simply by virtue of the DNA tests. This leaves two scientific explanations for a baby which carries only the DNA of its mother. I shall return the stage to Doctor Bateman."

"Thank you, Inspector. The first possibility is that the claimant produced a clone of herself. This has been observed in the natural world. However, any parthenogenetic progeny of a mammal would have two X chromosomes and would therefore be female: this child is male.

"The remaining possibility is that the claimant is carrying a chimera. It is extremely unlikely but nonetheless possible, in theory at least, that an egg could be cloned by the mother, develop through the embryonic stage and only then be fertilised by male sperm to make the embryo viable. There is much academic research on the subject but it is not a phenomenon which has been observed under scientific conditions."

"It is therefore highly unlikely, Doctor?"

"Yes, your honour."

"Thank you, doctor. It would appear that there are two possibilities: the first is improbable and the second more so. Either young Marilyn here has self-produced an embryo which her partner has then fertilised, or the alternative is quite fantastical.

"The only remaining explanation is an immaculate conception. This would be a miracle and therefore grounded in something other than science. But it goes further than religion and faith as well, because the most important thing of all is how Marilyn feels about all of this."

"I feel sick."

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, we'll take an interval. Court is in recess."

Unseen backstage, Marilyn is being tended by three wise souls and three shepherds. In this production, those roles are respectively opportunist capitalists, looking to package up a religion and sell it, and those who might otherwise guide her: legal counsel, social services, and rehabilitation advisers.

While the jury has retired, we should like the public gallery to consider the implications of this unique case.

It cannot be denied that young Marilyn is pregnant, so we have to consider two possibilities: That she is pregnant with her partner's child but through naivety rather than intention, and it is highly unlikely in any case. Equally unlikely, however, is that she may have had an immaculate conception and is carrying the child of God. Either way, she is the incubator, the transport and the means of delivery. The foetus is viable but still at a stage where it may be legally aborted.

There are other ethical matters to consider however, albeit some theoretical: if she is carrying the son of God, who has the authority to deny that child's life? If the father were to be her partner, there is no way to prove this, nor indeed is there sufficient proof that the two of them may have engaged in underage sex.

Given the evidence before us, I have reached a decision.

I invite you to join us in court, for Act II.

“Marilyn, firstly, I commend your courage in taking the stand today, and sharing your story with us. It’s a story which some might otherwise use for their own immoral gain, but your testament, and the expert evidence presented here today, allow us to prove something different, and to change the way people think, that while beliefs are to be respected, they should not deny liberty.

“Even though I’m an atheist who can also reconcile some religious theory with science, I have to rule on something which others might consider superior to me. But as a judge, I must transcend beliefs, and witness false deities worshipped by the gullible. Standing before me, metaphorically—or some would believe, all around—is God. A god who refuses to be questioned, for questioning denies faith. I put it to this god, that questioning faith is a human liberty, and should he wish to be judged, let him stand before this court.

“God had sex with you, Marilyn, without your consent. The conception may be immaculate, but the situation which I am faced with is unprecedented. With the eyes of the law, I see before me a 12-year-old girl who is pregnant. I will recommend that further counselling might be appropriate, so that you may retain the liberty of choice. I will ensure that choice is informed.

“God, I find you guilty of rape, and of sex with a minor. Sentence is simply that which you desire: for stories of your deeds to be told in public. Marilyn, is there anything you’d like to add, anything you’d like to say to God?”

“Yeah. I didn’t ask for this child, so why should I carry it for you? Maybe so he can spend thirty years tricking people about his old man, a filthy old kiddy-fiddler. But this kid can make amends for that, by killing himself, or as the other story goes, God gave his own son. Why? Because he thought he’d be found out?

“The son of God, who feeds the starving, by breaking bread and making wine, proclaiming that all those who consume it will be taking his body and his blood. Cannibalism by self-flagellation.

“You are one sick and twisted old man, God. Have a fucking bloody carcass, born to you this day from my vestal virginal vagina. Behold, the son of God, still born on stage.”

From all at the school, and the many others who worked on this production, we thank you for coming. We hope to see you again for our Easter production.

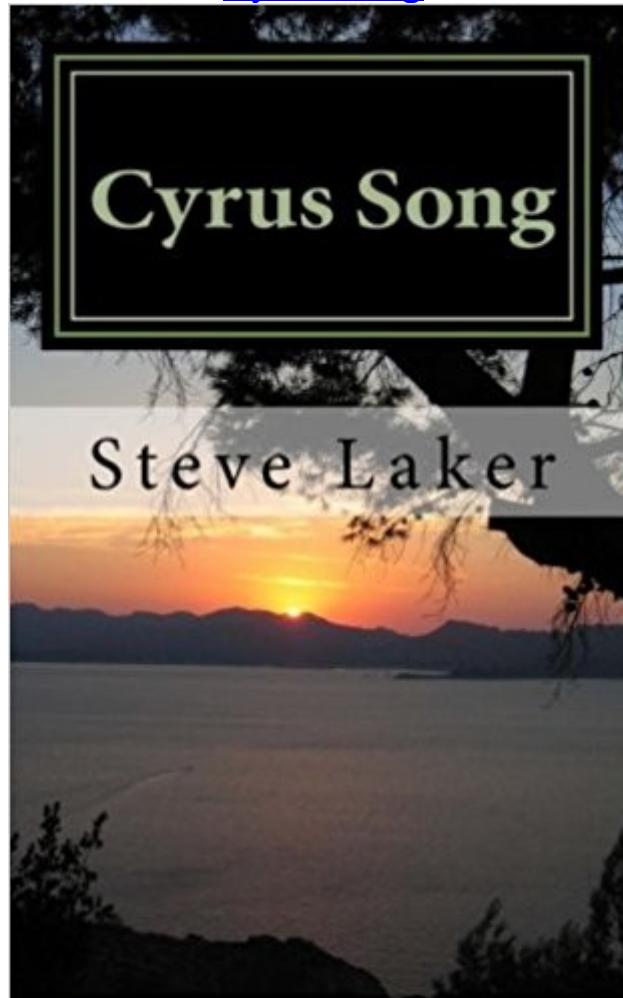
Have a very merry Christmas.

© Steve Laker, 2017

THE END

Now available from Steve Laker:

[Cyrus Song](#)



[Return to Contents](#)

THE COST OF GREED by Steven Havelock

Daniel knew he was a lucky man. He had the best-looking woman in town as his wife. *If only she wouldn't spend so much of my money.*

He looked at his sleeping wife. *She is so beautiful, but the more I earn the more she spends. We never have enough money. I feel like a hamster on a treadmill!*

He noticed her golden hair and how the duvet melted to the curves of her body. *One day we will have enough money for everything, more than enough for her spending sprees and more than enough for me also.*

Daniel Smith was a hard-working business owner. *I have purchased five properties in this small town and by this time next year I hope to have eight.*

He had just finished work at his estate agents' business and was on his way to look at a house that he had just bought yesterday at auction.

He parked his car outside the house on the hill on this cold November evening.

The wind blew at him remorselessly and he tucked his hand into his trouser pockets. *Blasted cold!*

He pulled out the key and undid the latch to the house. *Mine, all mine...*

He made a quick inspection of the ground floor and then headed upstairs. *What? Why are there shoes outside this bedroom? They look like they are made out of silver.*

He tried to open the door and found it locked from the other side. *What the hell! I didn't buy this house for someone to sleep in it without paying me rent!*

Daniel banged on the door.

"Open up!"

A thick Irish accent responded from the other side of the door. "Hold your horses, I'm coming!"

The door slowly opened and Daniel found himself staring at a small man who couldn't have been bigger than two foot. The man was dressed in an expensive rich blue suit.

"What are you doin..." Daniel never finished the sentence. *That midget has got a gold necklace, silver shoes and diamond cufflinks! God! They must be worth a few bob!* "What do you think you are doing sleeping in my house?"

“I’m sorry. My name is L.P Corn.” The man bowed low and his hat fell to the floor.

“Why is such a richly dressed man sleeping in this old house on the hill?”

“I’m on my way to meet a friend down south, but I tend to sleep in empty houses rather than hotels as I’m ashamed of my height. And it also avoids me getting mugged or harassed for my gold jewellery.”

Those ears. They’re pointy like an Elf’s?

The man picked up his hat and put it back on his head. “I’m sorry I will be leaving now,” said the small man quickly and tried to rush past Daniel, but Daniel put his leg in the way.

“Why are you in such a rush little man? Your name is L.P. Corn?” Daniel remembered the legend of the Leprechaun.

If you catch one they have to take you to their treasure.

“Yes, that is my name.”

“You’re a Leprechaun!”

Daniel grabbed the short man by the scruff of his collar, making the small man stand on his toes. “I caught you and according to legend you now have to take me to your treasure!”

“Okay! Okay! Just put me down.”

Great! He’s going to take me to his treasure! I will be rich!

“I must warn you, though, that my treasure is enchanted.” The small man looked up at him as if he was defeated.

“Yeah, just show me where it is, you midget, or…” Daniel didn’t finish the sentence, letting the threat hang ominously in the air.

“My treasure is just a short walk away in a cave near the bottom of this hill.”

Daniel followed the small man out of the house and to the bottom of the hill.

There’s a cave!

They entered the cave.

I can hear the sound of hammers on metal, but can’t see where the sound is coming from.

The cave was dark so Daniel took out his phone and put the phone's torch on. The narrow corridor of the cave ended in a thick wooden door.

"Your treasure is in there but be warned—"

Daniel didn't let him finish. He barged past the small man and shoved open the wooden door with his shoulder.

Oh my God!

Daniel's eyes bulged as he saw masses and masses of gold coins. Just then the sound of hammering got louder and louder.

Daniel picked up the gold coins and filled his pockets. *I'm rich! I'm rich!*

The room was getting bigger and bigger and so was the gold and his phone. Then he realised what was happening. *I'm shrinking! I'm no bigger than two foot now?!*

The small man was next to him.

"I told you the treasure was enchanted. All I needed was another fool whose greed overcame his fear."

The small man opened a side door that Daniel hadn't noticed. The sound of hammering increased. Daniel, now only two-foot-tall, saw where the sound was coming from. Inside were a dozen small men hammering away at making silver shoes and gold necklaces and cufflinks.

"You are now one of us and must work hard to make the gold for next fool who wants our treasure. There is an enchantment on you now that won't allow you to leave this place."

"No! I can't! How long must I stay here?!"

The Leprechaun smiled a cold callous smile.

"Forever!"

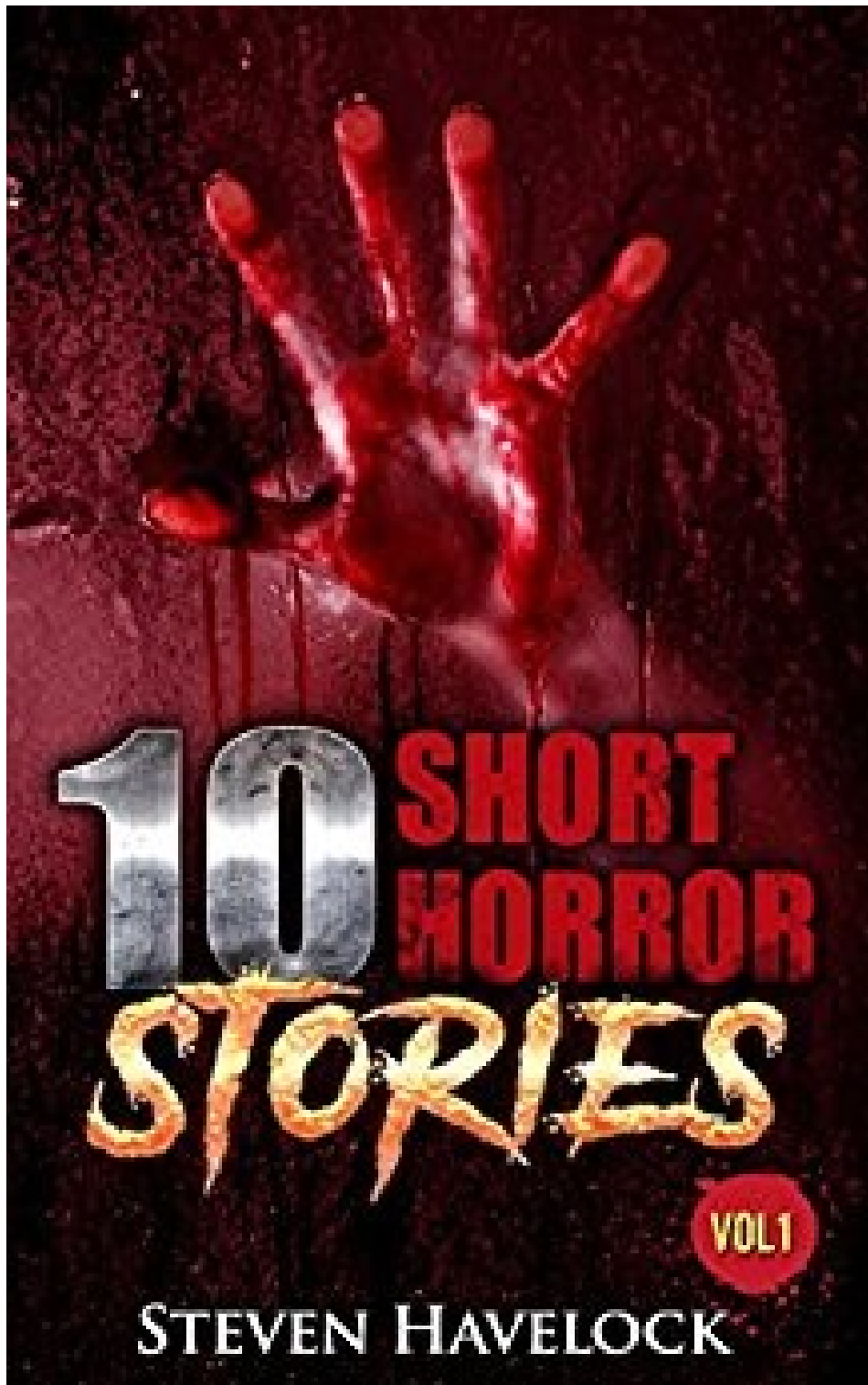
"What about my wife?"

"I'm sure someone as beautiful as her will easily find another man." Daniel heard the sound of hammering suddenly getting louder and louder. "Now get in there and start making our enchanted treasure."

Daniel screamed.

THE END

Steven Havelock's books are available from [Amazon](#).



[Return to Contents](#)

CONFLICT OF WITCHES by GK Murphy

(1)

1948

Since motorized vehicles were given freedom of the roads, everyone could see it wouldn't be long before the atmosphere became congested, while it became more dangerous to simply cross the street without getting mowed down by a speeding car in the process. And—already—there was the vapid and vaporous, meaty introduction of thickening smog on the streets and motorways, which curtailed everyone's agreement that these things, these automobiles, were a liability worth more discussion and negotiation as to how they benefited society and didn't hinder it, whether they should continue to thrive—or get killed off altogether, thus keep a dwindling population safer and healthier.

The war had ended not so long ago.

Mere years ago this had happened, as the world responded by its nations turning over a new leaf as leaders declared they would use new and innovative technology to benefit the peoples of all lands, instead of devising new and unique ways of butchering people on the battlefield—or killing them in their beds as they slept, with their nuclear bombs.

After all, hadn't this just happened in Japan, in Hiroshima, ending the Second World War to reach a peaceful solution amongst the world's populations?

However brutal this destructive act was, it seemed to have worked.

But others would cause serious harm to the people of the world. And perhaps not from beyond the shores of decimated Japan or conquered Germany, but farther away in no man's lands, in places hardly explored as well as cultures barely respected or understood, much to the world's ignorance, as well as arrogance.

But in this sector of Northern England, as Mary Donegal walked her 7-year-old son home from his junior school, through Nicholson Town in Cumbria, the thick smog seemed to have increased since this morning and this afternoon was at choking level, as well as a blemish to the vision. At 27, Mary had birthed her only son, Adam, young, and married shortly afterwards to a dashing ex sailor, who was rendered terminally unemployed (and unemployable), almost constantly strapped for cash and lacked all support regards his long-suffering wife and her struggle—and his brat. This dire situation arose since the abusive, lazy drunk spent all his welfare handouts on booze and town whores. The brute's name turned out to be Conrad Donegal from South London, with Irish descent of course—with a title like that.

Conrad was 42 years old and yet despite his handiness with his fists and thieving ways, had swept Mary off her feet, roughly impregnated her, and then stolen her heart with his cad like ways, down to earth humour and gentility. Looking back, Mary would have admitted she had no regrets marrying what would turn into this vile monster, since were it not for ex-Navy man Conrad, there would have been no Adam—so thank you, Conrad!

As Mary looked in the Wool Shop window, she spotted some good thick twill that she imagined would make a nice red scarf for Adam, as winter was approaching fast and the little

feller had to keep warm somehow. “Adam, look at this...” she uttered, “how would you like mummy to knit you a nice red scarf?”

There was no response from the child.

Where was he? Mary turned and looked around on the pavement. She’d just bought him an ice cream cone as he complained of feeling thirsty and begged her to buy him one. She had no choice...it was her Little Adam, at the end of the day.

Not seeing him, she escalated her voice, “Adam, I’m not playing games with you, my little soldier...where are you hiding? Come out...come out, wherever you are!” She moved towards the row of parked cars and looked left and right but the deserted street was quiet and still.

She spotted him in the middle of the road.

And then, the car ploughed into him, and she was screaming and wailing at the top of her lungs for her unfortunate boy as he was dragged along the concrete under the wheels, clumping up, bones twisting and breaking, his head crushed under the back wheels.

Mary stood there stock still, speechless, rendered unable to prevent the tragedy. Slowly, shaking her head, and mumbling incoherently, she felt gravitated along the concrete road in flurried stops and starts towards the place where the car had sped to a halt. The distraught driver stepped out of the car to inspect his gross and careless handiwork.

At first, nothing was said. He was just as shocked and stunned as the woman.

She recognized the driver of the killer car. It was Raymond Carpenter, the Mayor of Nicholson.

Almost gibbering, he raised his hands and said, “It wasn’t my fault. The kid was just standing in the middle of the road. How was I supposed to see him in all this fucking smog? It wasn’t my fault. It was your fault he died...you should have kept him on the pavement, away from moving traffic!”

Was this bastard actually blaming her?

He certainly was!

Narrowing her eyes, Mary set them on Mr Carpenter. “You’re the Mayor, aren’t you? Raymond Carpenter...?”

“That’s right, yes—and very good at my job. I’ll see you go to prison for child neglect for this!”

She hissed, “I’ll see you die first. Then after you, I’ll butcher your family, your sons and daughters, and all those overpaid, feeble old cronies that work and conspire with you at the Council Offices in the town centre. I’ll watch this whole town burn...the whole of Nicholson...the whole of England...I’ll burn this entire pathetic murderous country to the ground and then piss all over its graveyard as it stews in the burning furnaces of Hell.

Nobody will live, not you, not anybody...you will all suffer horribly and die, just like you murdered my little son!"

Carpenter said, "I'll have you arrested for threatening me like that. Your son is dead, yes. But I'm not to blame. You are...you are to blame...you and you only, you alone!"

"YOU LIE!!" Mary screamed, "I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU ALL!"

Together, the man and woman stood in silence before the police finally arrived and took both persons into custody. The Mayor was allowed to leave the Station after a short series of harmless questions and formalities, whilst oddly, Mary Donegal was kept in the cells overnight.

A week later, Mary refused to attend her son's funeral. For the angered mother, it was a matter of principle.

Two weeks later, she divorced Conrad and moved into a cottage betrothed to her by a distant relation in the hills over Nicholson. Hardly anybody ever saw her again...

Raymond Carpenter faced no charges but did go to trial in Carlisle, when the Mayor of Nicholson was asked to pay a small fine of twenty-five pounds sterling for driving under the influence.

Mary refused to even visit her son's grave.

(2)

This morning, it looked like Harry would be late for school if he did not make haste and shift his backside out of bed and get downstairs immediately. He might have liked to grab a bite to eat before setting off with his friend Kurt Hughes, who had just arrived at the house in Nicholson all wrapped up for the winter in scarf, hat and gloves. Like Harry Nicks, Kurt was fifteen years old, and both boys faced another term at school before entering work and married life, children, a car, and a mortgage. It was a depressing picture to envisage yet tragically a serene reality that had to be confronted by everyone at school about to leave.

But that was a good twelve months away.

Joyce Nicks and husband Roger sat in the dining room about to head off for work. They rendered the good homestead deserted and mostly empty, before they arrived back home at around five thirty. But Harry was prepared and his parents ensured he had a key, and often he let himself into the house via the backdoor.

Kurt was dark haired and thin, his face having sharper features in contrast to his friend Harry, and yet both boys were handsome teenagers and athletic in stature and enjoyed sports at school.

"Is he still in bed?" Kurt walked in the door and set his leather holdall down on the floor.

"It's not like him...he's usually awake and ready for classes. Do you want me to go upstairs and get him up, Mr Nicks?"

Roger Nicks peered over the top rim of the newspaper he was reading. He wasn't a bad father, by anybody's standards. He said, "Yeah, Kurt...be a pal and go get him ready. He was probably up late last night watching horror films. Yes, I knew getting him that new TV for his bedroom was a bad idea. We all know how much he likes his zombies!"

Joyce protested vehemently. "It's not a bad thing, Roger. Harry is just keeping up with the latest trends. All his friends at school like zombies and vampires...like you Kurt, eh? Really, don't you like the gory zombie films?"

Kurt shrugged and said, "To be honest, not really."

"Oh..." Joyce said, looking away as if embarrassed by his retort, "oh well, yes, you can go upstairs and see if he's getting ready. But don't shout at him. There's nothing worse than a rude awakening."

"Sometimes, it's all that works, though...a good shout and a dish of cold water in the face," Roger chuckled, not once averting his eyes from his paper. "Yeah, get yourself up there, Kurt lad."

Kurt headed upstairs.

He paused to knock gently on the wood panel. He said, "Harry, we'll be late for classes if you don't sharpen up your act. Can I come in? I don't want to enter to find you lying there with your balls in your hand, that's all." He pushed the door open to go inside the bedroom. "Right, here I come—brace yourself, Gringo!"

Entering the gloom inside, he was taken aback slightly. The curtains were closed shut and no lights were switched on.

Kurt marvelled as Harry lay seemingly unconscious on the bed—a bed that currently levitated at least three feet above the floor. Harry was in what looked like a trance.

It was not surprising, since it was obviously part and parcel of his friend's ongoing spells and forays into the occult and magic, he knew. In the past, over perhaps the last three years, Kurt had observed little things like this with Harry, and to be honest, he was long past caring or being surprised at these feats. However, it was indeed living proof that magic, white or black, existed, and that his best buddy in the world Harry Nicks was an avid practitioner.

Fifteen years old and practising voodoo and black magic. It was no state to be in for someone that age, surely. But try telling Harry that.

Kurt walked closer. "Harry, can you hear me? You need to come down. I got a phone call last night from my Uncle Dominic and he's invited me to his house in the hills for the weekend. He wanted me to bring a friend, so I said I'd take you. I've talked about it with your mum and dad and they don't mind. Dom lives in a virtual mansion. It will be brilliant to go up there and see the old fool. He may even take us hunting by the lake."

The bed began to lower. Suddenly, it was back on the floor. Harry, blond, blue eyed, turned his head and looked at his friend. "Is that the Uncle Dominic who is supposed to practise magic?"

“Supposedly...”

Harry swung his body around and sat up on the bed. He smiled and said, “Then you can count me in. In the meantime, we’d better get to school.”

“Good idea...” Kurt watched Harry pull on his shoes, “Are you always this damn nerdy?”

“How do you mean? Magic never harmed anyone. That is, when in the right hands.”

Kurt disagreed, “It can be used for evil as well. People have been murdered in voodoo rituals, sacrificed, butchered for the Devil’s delight...and you’re telling me it’s harmless.”

“Yes, and like I say, when in the right hands...”

Laughing, Kurt wanted to wind his friend up. “My Uncle Dom will burn you at the stake. I might be wrong, but I hear witches live in the hills over Nicholson. There’s one woman in particular. She must be over a hundred years old. Nobody sees her, though, since she’s a recluse...one serious hermit residing in the shadows and gloom.”

“It sounds like you’re writing a novel with descriptions like that, my friend.”

Shrugging, Kurt said, “You never know, everybody has a story to tell.”

“A horror novel...?”

“Yes, maybe science fiction or books about wizards and witches. Yeah, I do fancy myself as a renowned ultra-cool author one day and living the high life, going to conventions and literary functions, signing my books as I get drunk on red wine, cocaine and heroin, as I cop off with all those sexy writer chicks...you know, like those romance and Gothic erotica authors, perhaps. God knows, there’s certainly no shortage of them!”

Harry stood up. “Should we head for school, then?”

“Yeah,” Kurt conceded, “So long as we walk to school, rather than take off and float there like ghosts or voodoo princes and princesses, or like those horrible creatures you see on Dr Who episodes or things that suddenly emerge from bottomless pits and ancient graves...” He shivered as he followed his friend out the room, adding, “Yes, and I know Harry, it’s too early in the morning for all this creepy shit!”

In the kitchen downstairs, mum and dad retained the same positions as previously, mum standing by the cooker drinking tea, as dad read the paper and drew on his pipe. Above him hung a cloud of smoke, tinged with the turgid and aromatic scent of Saint Bruno pipe tobacco which you could detect from throughout the entire house and probably from as far away as out in the front garden or on the street beyond the privet hedgerow.

Harry turned to his dad. “So, is it okay for me to go with Kurt to his Uncle Dominic’s place for the weekend, dad?”

“Definition of a farmer,” was his father’s reply as he quipped, “A man outstanding in his field.”

The boys or Joyce Nick’s failed to spot the humour.

Dad looked at everyone in turn. Exasperated, he said, “It’s a joke, can’t you see? The farmer and the definition of a farmer...the farmer is technically a professional gentleman outstanding in his field?” Bewildered, everyone present turned and looked at each other. “Are you all bloody simple minded or something? It’s called intelligent humour, in case you didn’t realize it...the farmer and the definition of a man outstanding in his bloody field. Oh, forget it...” Roger Nicks returned to reading his morning rag.

Joyce Nicks must have detected something the boys did not. “Oh, I get it, a joke...”

Roger sighed, “It’s like I never tell jokes in this house, or like I have no sense of humour. Believe me, I do like to have a laugh sometimes, despite popular opinion I’m a complete bore.” He got up off his chair and walked towards the door, took down his coat from the wooden stand in the facing lobby. He quipped, “Sometimes, my intelligence is wasted on this sea of fools!” Roger was grinning when he said this. Headed for the front door without so much as a kiss for his wife beforehand, he chuckled and said, “I’ll see you all tonight, people. And yes Harry, I approve you going to Kurt’s Uncle Dominic’s place for the weekend. Bye for now, all!” and suddenly he was outside on the street closing the front door behind him.

Joyce sipped from her cup. “I’d better get ready for work myself. Just like you two had better hurry along so as not to be late for your first class of the day. And I’ll see you, Harry, tonight when I get home for supper. I bought you some waffles and baked beans for your tea...they’re in the cupboard for when you get home.”

“Thanks mum...my favourite.”

She gestured for the pair to run along. “You should wear scarves in this weather. It’s windy, it’s cold, and it’s either going to rain or snow. Remember, you live in Cumbria, and people in Cumbria always anticipate the worst.”

Kurt joked, “Maybe you should knit us one, Mrs Nicks?”

Harry leant forward and kissed his mother’s cheek and together he and Kurt headed outside into the cold light of morning. In the street, the skies seemed enigmatic with huddled clouds, and further to the boys’ right above the distant hillside, it was positively black and charcoal grey with a dull and deepening cloud, a miserable sight. On the street itself, parked cars and vans lined the sides of the road, yet there was little traffic in sight for this normally busy time of day. It was common to see people pass in duffel coats and woollens, wrapped up to protect from the cold winter ahead. It was November, after all, and somewhere along the line it would be Christmas.

The boys walked towards the bus stop.

Kurt said, “Both your mum and dad have cars, but when have they ever gave us a lift to school?”

“They’re working professionals. They have to change and adapt to circumstances.”

“Bullshit, Harry...the only circumstance they have worthy of discussion is that they’re overpaid, and can’t even be bothered to drive their son to school in the winter morning, and instead let him—and me—freeze their arses off in the cold November!”

Harry chuckled, “Again, you sound like an author’s prologue.”

They walked in silence for a while.

Suddenly, Kurt said, “Can I talk to you about something? I’ve been having trouble with Clive Bloomfield as school. He’s giving me a hard time every time I see him. He’s bullying the shit out of me and I feel miserable.”

“Have you reported it to anyone? You can get help to stop that stuff going on in schools. Henry Alison bullies me all the time. You know something, Kurt...I guess you and me both attract the dregs of society and their attention.”

“Sometimes Clive phones me at home and threatens me down the line. His sick messages keep me awake at nights. He says things about my dad. He says when my dad killed himself, he did it because of me, because I was a liability...Nobody knows the truth about my dad, whether it was suicide or an accident, because he was found washed up on the shore of the lake. He went fishing and didn’t come home that night. A week later, his body was found...he may have fallen out the boat, who knows?” He shook his head miserably, adding, “I don’t know, damn it...”

“Your dad was a good man, Kurt. His death had nothing to do with you. He was just a troubled guy who had had enough.”

“But how do you know that?”

Harry drew to a halt to face his friend. He said, “He served in Iraq and Afghanistan and experienced a lot. I think it’s clear why he refused to take no more. He’d had enough. He could take no more. It had to end somehow, and he realized how to make it end.”

“But why doesn’t Clive Bloomfield realize this and leave me alone?” Kurt was a little tearful. “It’s just mum and me at home now. I can’t honestly turn to her for help or advice how to deal with overweight dickheads like that fat fucker. She’s too busy swigging bottle after bottle of Russian vodka and smoking sixty a day. I’m lost in the world. Listen, when we go to Uncle Dom’s at the weekend, I’m going to appeal to Dom, ask if I can move into his place in the hills. Yeah, I’ll still attend school but I’ll work and do manual labour on his farm, and I’ll leave mum to her own devices at home.”

“You can’t leave your mum, Kurt. She needs you like you need her.”

Dismally, Kurt said, “I can’t take anymore. She’s started bringing men home, ones she picks up in pubs and bars, and they screw her and do other stuff. The walls are thin in our house.”

“Shit, I didn’t know that. Shit, that is bad.”

“Clive Bloomfield knows all this. And I’m going to face the music today at school and everyday afterwards. My life completely sucks. Bullied, destitute...”

“Queer?”

Kurt sighed, “Sometimes I wonder what it must be like to be queer and if queers actually get a harder time than me. To be honest, put up against me and the shit I tolerate day in day out at home with my drunken mother, they live in a blissful paradise. Uncle Dominic is my only hope. I just pray he agrees to let me go and live with him. He really should, since he’s family, my own flesh and blood...and blood is thicker than water, or vodka.”

“We’ll soon find out. Listen, I’ll have a word with Bloomfield on your behalf, if you like. But please don’t expect some kind of miracle. He might well punch my face in.”

The two boys approached the bus stop, accelerating as the bus neared. In fact, they both picked up yet more speed as they ran, when Harry shouted, “Come on, the last to board the big red bus is a raving transvestite!”

Getting there just on time, the friends boarded the bus, going upstairs onto the deck above as they usually did. Considering their previous discussion, both were in good spirit and looked forward to morning classes. Harry planned on cornering Clive Bloomfield at some stage. He would only do this, if it helped his friend Kurt...

(3)

In the schoolyard after a day’s learning, Harry Nicks loitered by the long wall which encircled it, as he waited for Kurt, to go and catch the bus home together. Kurt was late as usual, he needed to take a quick dump in the toilets, unless he wished to shit a few log steamers in his pants on the way home.

“Come on, Kurt...” Harry urged under his breath, peeved as he glanced down at his wristwatch. “Late as usual. You have another five minutes or you’re walking home, and I’m catching the bus.”

In the mass of kids on their way home, a teenager named Keith Healy appeared out of the blue. He approached Harry from across the yard. Recently, his older brother Jonny had been killed in a motorcycle accident.

“How’s it going, Keith?” Harry asked his old acquaintance. “Man, you look tired and fucked. What’s going on?”

“My parents refuse to let me view Jonny’s body at the morgue before he gets cremated on Friday. He was my best buddy, you know? I have a right to see him. It’s only fair, but those bastards, mum and dad...bastards!”

“Hey, show them some respect!”

“Fuck respect,” retorted a tetchy Keith Healy, “I’m heading up to the morgue tonight and I will see Jonny if it kills me doing so. I just want to see my brother, that’s all, before he’s gone

forever without a fucking trace, except for a tray full of dust in a vase to go on the mantle above the fireplace!”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? Visiting the morgue at night? Doesn’t the thought of it freak you out?”

Shrugging, Keith said, “It’s a deliberate thing that I go up there in the dark. I won’t be noticed by anyone whilst under cover of darkness, plus it’s quieter than day and less hassle, and it’ll be just me and Jonny, like old times, just me and my brother.”

The sentiment was good but the proposition stank to high heaven. But Harry recognized Keith was immune to swaying.

Harry said, “Do you want me to come with you? By the way, it will be locked to the public. Just how do you expect to get in there?”

“There are small hidden windows, cellar doors, back doors, tradesmen’s entrances...piece of piss!”

But Harry was adamant. “I still wouldn’t visit the morgue alone at night. It’s scary during the daytime, which includes when the sun is shining and you can at least begin to define faces, unlike if it’s dark when there are too many shadows for perverts and wannabe killers to lurk inside. I take it you know about the murders in these parts. The prostitutes in Nicholson town centre...?”

“That’s women, though. Prostitutes are women. Whoever is responsible for killing them won’t bother trying to kill me, because the killer doesn’t make it his business to butcher men!”

Concerned, Harry said, “Killers don’t pick and choose their victims. It’s usually first come, first served with many of them—they barely ever discriminate on who to slaughter next.”

“Nevertheless, I’m still going to the morgue. Don’t worry, if I bump into anyone suspicious, I’ll enlighten you the next day at school.”

“You may not still be alive to enlighten me.”

Keith moved in closer to the youth sitting on the wall. “Is it true the killer cuts the hearts from the chests of his victims?”

“Yeah,” Harry confided, “And so far he’s killed three people, desecrating their bodies all in the same vain.”

“Fuck me, definitely some scary shit going on there for that to happen to his victims.”

Keith turned and looked around, surveying the kids heading home for lunch, or in some cases to torture the life out of their long-suffering parents.

He patted Harry on the shoulder and then headed off towards the bus stop. Harry felt like joining him, and would shortly if Kurt didn't shake a leg. Again, he negotiated his wristwatch, and again willed his buddy to hurry up.

But a bloke had to take a shit!

Then Clive Bloomfield suddenly materialized out of nowhere and made a beeline straight towards Harry, angry and threatening in his gait. "Where's that skinny little shithouse, Nicks? Tell me, or I'll smash your mug in!"

Once up close, the overweight teenage bully raised his right fist to throw a punch at Harry.

Harry raised his hands to protect and guard his face from the incoming brutal onslaught and flurried assault, and something happened which quite literally elevated and served to lift young Bloomfield way up off the schoolyard's grey concrete floor, when he was flung backwards and through the very air. Whatever it was that occurred here, the force gripped his body and raised him high. People stared and gasped in horror and anticipation as they attempted to figure where the fat bully would end up. It turned out, this was high up on the slate roofing of the PE building at the other end of the yard.

Up there, Bloomfield remained rooted to the spot, alone and afraid, aghast as he wept like a baby.

Clive Bloomfield hated heights more than anything else in the world. Spiders, snakes, insects, no bother at all...but fucking heights!

Along then came a certain history teacher named Miss Cadence Pending, an old biddy destined for retirement. In her element, she would relish this occasion, by her own individual and inimitable style in scorning the bigger boy's behaviour. She stood in the centre of the yard and clapped her hands, knowing fine well this fat brute on the roof had a history of assaulting his fellow pupils at the school, she was having no more of it! This occasion proved her biggest opportunity to expel this clot for good and have done with it. She grinned as she addressed the stranded bully high up.

"Have you been smoking that awful cannabis again, Mr Bloomfield? I think you have. Indeed, it is all too apparent and downright obvious you've been smoking it...otherwise why would anybody enact a scene so imbecilic? From this point on, on behalf of the Head, I hereby expel you from this place of learning, and inform you that details will be included in the letter I write to your parents in the morning!"

Kurt appeared. He looked up at his weeping and petrified tormentor on the roof, stunned at first as he turned to his friend and regarded him knowingly. Bewildered, he attempted a smile as he said to his best friend Harry, "My God, you did this shit, didn't you?" Immediately, he cried out in elation as he embraced his friend and hugged him. "You are a criminal genius!"

"He won't be bothering you again. Miss Pending just expelled him. Consider him out of your life forever..."

They stood there for a little while to observe the awkward situation and to gloat over the coward stranded on the roof. Shortly, the Fire Brigade would arrive to rescue this bloated oaf. Harry and Kurt would not see it. Both were on the bus on their way home.

(4)

Later the same night whilst the majority of this town in Cumbria slept, a killer was at large in the Nicholson community wreaking his own brand of revenge. Usually, his prey was prostitutes and other ladies of the night, or those unfortunate enough to be walking the streets late.

The murderous one was deformed in the genitalia. He even had to urinate through a glorified straw attached to the tiny purple stump that should have formed a regular penis, which drained off alongside his left ankle since it was strapped to his thigh or upper calf. The urine would drain into a plastic bag whenever he found he was indoors.

It was enough to make him hate and loathe the gentler sex and want to butcher as many as was possible for one lonely man.

His name was Richard Florence and he lived in an underground apartment in the town bowels. Nobody knew about his affliction other than his GP and local hospital, which he visited fortnightly to change his colostomy dressings and receive new equipment. Always, it was an embarrassment to tolerate the doctors and nurses play around with him, often some younger ones pausing to giggle a little, angering Florence, yet making him more determined to commit such vile acts of murder and mutilation.

It would remain a mystery as to exactly why he dug into his victim's breast and removed the heart. Indeed, it was a sickening thing which captured and held the national media's attention, and forced the authorities to work harder at their jobs to catch this monstrous beast and bring him before a Court of Law.

But Richard Florence was crafty. He'd thought all this through and devised techniques that would keep his identity secured for a very long time. Needless to add, this killer wasn't dumb or stupid.

He drove a black Ford Fiesta to the hospital for his checks and change of dressings every fortnight on the Thursday mornings. It was this car that transported him in and out of various hamlets around Nicholson, where he committed his crimes.

So far, he'd killed four women, in towns such as Workington, Whitehaven and Fickle Moor, as well as one in Nicholson. Tonight, one more conquest would make his kills a precise five in the bag.

However, tonight was different. Tonight, it would be a male who suffered his wrath. Florence loitered on the lower corner of Nicholson High Street, observing one particular prostitute and her pimp argue vehemently due to some altercation over who should get the bigger percentage, him or her, the woman saying it was her that got fucked on a nightly basis and took all the risks, especially now there was a deranged murderer on the loose in these northern parts. She argued how her life was on the line most nights while the pimp partied and lived the high life in local pubs and bars on the money she worked hard for.

“I look after you, Lorna,” Maxwell Kaufman argued, escalating his voice, “I never see you without food, gas and electricity for you and your two kids, and I’m always there when you need me, so don’t give me this shit you want a pay increase...I look after you, Lorna, you know that!”

The huge black guy stood out like a sore thumb in Nicholson. Everybody in the town, and for miles around surmised he was a pimp, and could probably have proved the fact.

“Maxwell, I’m sorry, but I need more funds. I’m putting my life on the line. In case you forget, Jenny Graham was killed the other night, and her killer is still on the loose. I could be next in line to die and you, you greedy bastard, won’t give me a measly raise in pay. It’s not like I’m asking much, is it? Just the odd thirty or forty quid a night and the remainder will go directly into your swollen leather wallet. Come on, Maxwell. Wake up and smell the roses!”

“I can’t afford to forgo cash like that. I’m an entrepreneur, and I have business ventures ongoing that need funding, since alongside yourself I have to pay other working men and women’s wages. I can’t afford to allow healthy profit margins like thirty or forty pounds a night slide me by. Believe me, girl...sooner or later I’ll go bankrupt!”

Lorna Williams pulled off her ear rings and emptied the contents of her bag into her pimp’s hands, money and all. “Well, I’m done here, no more of this crap...maybe I should become a pimp, eh? I bet it doesn’t take many brain cells!”

“What are you talking about? You can’t do this. Do you know who Maxwell Kaufman is? I might be black but my parents were Jewish and like you know Jews don’t enjoy losing good money! Believe me, I’ll have you taken out for this—I’ll have you assassinated!”

“That’s total bullshit. You’re not worth even a five-pound note. And you’re not Jewish...your name was changed by deed poll. You’re just another face from Birmingham, one who spotted a gap in the market in West Cumbria...” She turned her back on her boss and strode off. “And I’ll be warning the other girls about you as well, Leroy!”

Maxwell felt exasperated, “I’m not called Leroy, bitch. It’s Maxwell and fuck you...you think I actually need a cow like you? Wait and see, you’ll eventually come scurrying and running back to me with your tail between your legs once the funds dry up and your offspring goes hungry. Yes—and it’s coming up to Christmas, remember. Yes—and it will be mighty cold in your cheap council house on the estate...” He knew he was getting nowhere, so gave up and simply yelled, “BITCH!”

But when Maxwell Kaufman turned around to walk off, he found himself face to face with the Grim Reaper Incarnate—for indeed, Judgement was nigh, and in fact, Judgement Day was in effect. The long, sharpened instrument tore into the man’s chest. It jerked inside the flesh as Richard Florence intended it to, when it ripped a deep gash, whilst all the time oozing amounts of blood squirted forth. Finally, it was jerked again and again before its ultimate removal, but the killer stabbed into the chest over and over again, as the doomed pimp’s eyes bulged like two well rounded boiled eggs from their sockets and he groaned. He looked up at his murderer defiantly as he collapsed to his knees and then fell.

Quickly, Richard Florence surveyed the immediate vicinity to make sure the coast was clear before enacting his next depraved act.

He wasted no time in quickly unbuttoning the deceased pimp's brown leather jacket and yellow shirt underneath. All the while, the madman's eyes glistened with excitement and gleeful anticipation. He giggled maniacally as he performed the gross act. He pulled the obstructing clothing aside to expose the chest area to fully observe the enticing flesh and bone. The following scenario was the best part of all. Florence dived further into another vast ocean of blood infused depravity. He inserted a blade into the man's exposed chest, and set about ripping a wider gap in the drenched tissue. Chuckling, he dug deeper and severed those arteries, and plucked out Maxwell Kaufman's heart.

One more glance around to see if anybody was about.

Nobody in sight...

The heart tucked away neatly in a plastic bag, Richard Florence got into his black Ford Fiesta and started up the engine. Hands on the steering wheel, he paused to lick his fingers clean of blood and any other stray bone fragments or gristle his hands had attracted on the job.

Finally, the car pulled away from the kerb and sped along the darkened High Street.

CONCLUDES IN THE NEW YEAR

SUMMER 2017

Schlock!

Quarterly

Includes Two
Episodes of
Sword and
Planet epic

THE CAVES OF MARS

THOUGHTS DURING THE STORM

Christopher A Lay

THE GOD OF FAMILIAR PASTURES

BY KONSTANTINE PARADIAS

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

[Return to Contents](#)

SCHLOCK! REVIEW by John C Adams

Teatro Grottesco by Thomas Ligotti

There's room on your bookshelf for Thomas Ligotti even if you don't know it yet. If it's already there, you've probably guessed why I loved this book. It fits just there, in the small space left between H P Lovecraft and Ramsey Campbell, just along from Edgar Allan Poe.

Teatro Grottesco (2006) is a natty little collection of thirteen short stories united by the common theme of the carnival and funfair.

Ligotti is intrigued by the fundamental unreality of the intersection of everyday life (obscenely broken down, especially in his native Detroit) with a dark, 'hilariously preposterous' inversion of itself (embodied by the funhouse and the carnival). Before you open the pages of *Teatro Grottesco* for the first time it might be helpful to imagine how H P Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe would feel, and what they would write, if by some mischievous trick of the universe they ended up in modern day America. Then bring to mind the sense of dislocation and unreality they would feel. We can imagine it because we feel it too.

In *The Town Manager*, we see small town America transformed by the arrival of a new town manager after the unexplained (but by no means unexpected) disappearance of the old one. The lives and environs of the townsfolk are turned upside down, in a manner that won't surprise anyone who's ever visited a Disney theme park:

"All of the businesses along Main Street had been transformed in some manner, although their tone was not always as whimsical as Ritter's Comfort Castle or Leeman's Baby Town. A number of the buildings appeared simply as abandoned store fronts until one explored the interior and discovered that the back room was actually a miniature movie theatre where foreign cartoons were projected upon a bare wall."

Teatro Grottesco is a systematic tour through the aspects of life that make us feel dislocated and uncomfortable. And there's probably nothing more unsettling than a childhood memory that gambols like a tantalising will o' the wisp forever just out of reach. In my case, I'm most prone to this sensation when I'm on the verge of falling asleep—something that doesn't make for a peaceful night's sleep.

In *Gas Station Carnivals* Quisser is convinced that way back in his youth there used to be broken down sideshows attached to isolated rural gas stations to entice motorists to pull over and fill up. The narrator is immediately sceptical:

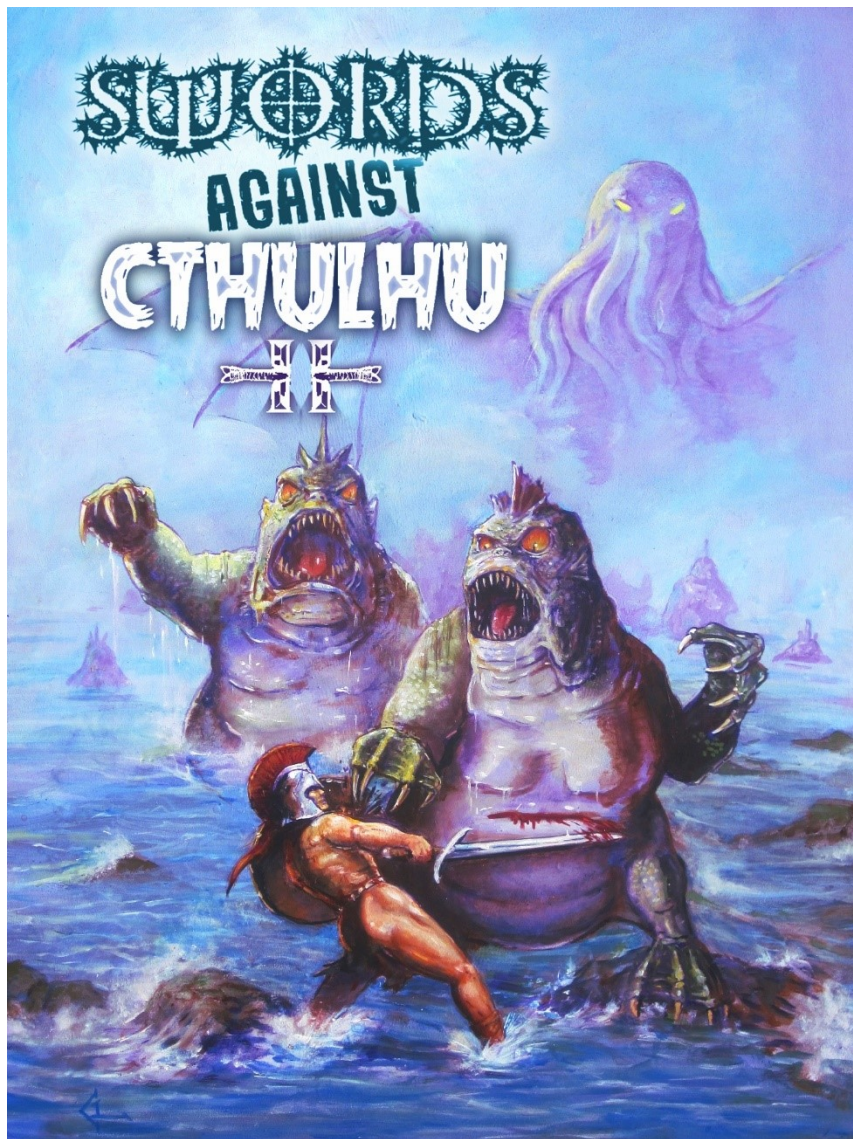
*"'I think I've heard enough tonight,' I interjected, my hand pressing against my queasy stomach.
'What are you saying?' asked Quisser. 'You remember them, don't you? The gas station carnivals. Maybe just a faint memory. I was sure you would be the one to know about them.'"*

Thomas Ligotti remains as mysterious as his writing. By design, one imagines. In a world replete with selfies and blogs, Ligotti's distance is refreshing.

John C Adams

Schlock! Webzine Reviewer

THE END



[Return to Contents](#)

THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO by Gregory KH Bryant

Episode Thirty-Nine

Hours stretched into days. Days stretched into Jovian weeks.

Colonel Bridgemont threw himself into the countless tasks that preserving and rebuilding Callisto Base 1 demanded.

Evacuate the wounded to Callisto Base 2, whose medical facilities miraculously survived the battle almost completely unscathed.

Provide for the daily and basic needs of those who remained at Callisto Base 1, food and housing foremost among them. For weeks, people slept on mats in the streets.

Map out the damage to the base. Brace against any further structural failures. Begin plans for rebuilding.

Emily was among the first to be evacuated to the medical facilities of Callisto Base 2. She was transported there upon the “Bellerophon”, with her father and mother, and her brother Jeffrey accompanying her, along with several hundred others, their bodies wrapped in bloodied bandages, some of them missing limbs, and all wounded in some grave manner or other.

Carter Ward, for want of anything better to do, followed. When Illara requested permission from Colonel Bridgemont to join the vigil over Emily, Bridgemont readily agreed.

“You’re just a pilot, anyway,” he said, grinning. “Not a forklift operator, which is what we need right now. Stay in touch. Report to me every six hours.”

“Thank you, sir,” she answered, with a salute.

She rode with Carter in his ship, the O8 111A, and Mud, seeing the party had moved on, followed in his own ship, the “Charon”.

Emergency housing had been set up at Callisto Base 2 for any evacuees from the other bases more badly hit by the battle. The Talbots easily found a small quarters, a single room with sheets for walls, set up in an office which they shared with a dozen other families. Ward and Illara stayed on the O8 111A. Mud stayed on the “Charon”.

And Emily lay upon a cot in an emergency room, with several dozen other wounded. Her head was swathed in bandages. Tubes ran from her mouth and nose. And every moment, someone was with her. Joyce almost never left Emily’s side, leaving only once every twenty or thirty hours to sleep. Jeffrey, too, maintained a constant vigil, with his father, Story Talbot. The old man’s thin head was heavy. His eyes never left his daughter’s face.

Illara came often, bringing Ward with her. She spoke soothingly into Emily’s ear, trying, vainly, to provoke a response. Ward, for his part, stood off to one side. His body was rigid, his hands clenched into fists at his side.

They stayed usually for four hours at a time, allowing the Talbots to have their own time with their daughter and sister. Mud, though he had met the Talbots on several occasions, was not close to them, and felt he'd be intruding his presence upon their grief, so he stayed discretely behind when Illara and Ward visited with the unconscious Emily.

Besides, he was there for his own friend, Ward. Carter Ward.

Mud was worried. Ward had always been a dour soul. One with a droll sense of humour, of course, and one who was most loyal to his friends. He was good to have in a fight, reliable, never lost his cool. And he and Mud had had some good times together. Wild times.

But Mud had known since their tour with the Martian Rangers, half a lifetime ago, that Ward was one of those guys who just hated being alive. To him, it was all just a huge, unrelenting pain in the ass. As he had told Mud, living was 'just 'one goddamned thing after another'.

Which was why he had left Mars and become one of the itinerate space rats. Not for the adventure, as Mud had done. But for the solitude. To get away from all the hassle of living while he waited to finally get this shining shit show over with, and die. And get on to the next thing, whatever it was, even if there was no 'next thing'. Just get it all over with.

But there had been a subtle change in Ward, since that Emily kid came along. He had come to be just a bit softer, just a bit more mannerly. He saw it, there on Callisto, during those peaceful and happy weeks as the "Bellerophon" was being offloaded, and he and Ward were waiting for their orders from Colonel Westland. Mud had seen the subtle change, on those occasions at the Talbots, when he visited with Illara and Ward, when he saw Ward listening patiently as a happy Emily chattered away at him, pelting him with all sorts of girlish nonsense. And, yeah, patiently. That wasn't a word Mud had associated with Ward before. But maybe Emily had taught him some patience.

So Ward had come to be just a tad more human than Mud had ever seen him before. When he and Ward and Illara went out, Ward was, most uncharacteristically, almost solicitous of her. He opened the door for her, let her sit first at the table. He laughed more readily at her jokes, and Mud's, and more frequently. Illara noticed the difference, too, but she, like Mud, was too wise to make mention of it.

But, from the moment Emily was pulled from the utility tunnel, covered with dust and in a coma, it seemed as if that nascent humanity in the man had been brutally erased. Not merely wiped away, but completely erased, as if it had never existed.

The heartless Ward returned, and had taken over its old birthright.

Once again, Ward never smiled, rarely spoke. And when he did speak, it was only in response to something that had been said to him, and then, always with the fewest words necessary and a tone that did not encourage more questions. Illara and Mud both saw this. They, of course, were worried.

Life had always been pain for Ward. Now, through Illara, the Talbot family and Emily, especially, he had learned a new kind of pain, a whole new dimension of it. That was the pain of hurting for others. He had never experienced it before, never once had he guessed its poignant agony.

Now he had. He had learned it and he hated it. Like a feral animal betrayed by the promise of a salt lick left out by hunters, Ward returned, his heart filled with rage, to the darkest, the most remote, and the most barbaric places in his soul.

Once again, he was the soulless, humourless killer that fled human company for the cold comfort of the infinite nothingness of space.

Mud knew it was a waste of effort, trying to counsel his old friend. He knew that telling Ward that 'this was the risk that came with caring', or any other such platitudes would only inflame Ward's simmering rage.

Over time, Jeffrey returned to Callisto Base 1 for periodic tours of a hundred hours at a time to assist with the salvage of the base and the rebuilding of the least damaged regions, returning at the end of that tour to sit with his sister with his mother and father.

Illara, too, returned to Callisto Base 1 to assist Colonel Bridgemont, or to take a quick tour of the other bases in the Jovian system, coming back to stay with the Talbots and to share their vigil over Emily. Routines developed around Emily. When living quarters were finally built, after many months, Joyce, Jeffrey and Story Talbot moved back to Callisto Base 1, leaving one person or two always at Emily's side.

But, though she was closely attended to by doctors, nurses and orderlies, her condition remained unchanged. The wounded all around her were treated, new limbs replacing lost ones, wounds sutured and healed. Most returned to their various duties and lives, but Emily never once returned to consciousness. Machines kept her lungs breathing, kept blood flowing through her body, but they could not bring her back to wakefulness.

Emily was finally moved to a private room, one with large bay windows that allowed the light of Jupiter to shine through. A more comfortable and comforting place, one which permitted the Talbots some small degree of privacy.

"If we were on Earth," one of the surgeons explained to Story Talbot and Carter Ward, one late afternoon when the slanting light of Jupiter came in through the wide windows, "We could get her fixed up pretty quickly. But here, we just don't have the equipment to treat her."

"Then let's get her to Earth," Ward said.

"She wouldn't survive the trip. Here we can keep her stable, and hope for the best."

"But for how long?" Joyce asked.

"We can keep her alive for a very long time," the surgeon said.

"But with no promise of improvement?" Story Talbot asked.

The surgeon said nothing, but only shook his head.

And Carter Ward came to the end of what little patience he had.

He took one hard look at Story Talbot. Ward thrust his hand toward Talbot in such a restrained fury, and with such a murderous scowl upon his face, that Talbot was several seconds realizing that Ward was offering to shake hands.

Talbot grasped Ward's hand in his own, firmly, and wrapped his left hand over both. The men shook.

"Carter?" Talbot asked.

Carter Ward only turned to Joyce, and tapping his fingers to his forehead in a gesture that could have been a casual salute, he said only, "Ma'am". He stared at Emily for a long moment, then only said, "See ya, Emily,".

He turned on his heel and left the room.

Ward strode out of the medical centre, and through the streets of Callisto Base 2, taking the rail to the tiny Space Port outside the base, where he had docked his ship, the O8 111A. Next to it was Mud's much larger ship, the "Charon".

Ward was stepping into his ship when he heard Mud's familiar booming voice, "Where yuh headed?"

Mud, keeping watch on his friend, saw him striding toward his ship, and he saw a determination in the stride, a bloodlessness in the way Ward moved, that told him 'something's up'.

Ward paused. He was in no mood to talk. But this was Mud. His friend.

He turned and faced Mud. Raised his chin toward the sky.

"Up there," he said.

"Any particular reason?"

"Gonna kill Turhan Mot."

"Can't invite yer friends along?"

Ward said nothing. His jaw was clenched.

"Okay... can't say goodbye to yer friends?"

"I'm not gonna find the fucker, standing around, chatterin' at ya,"

"Don' let me stand in yer way, then," Mud said, clapping a huge hand on Ward's shoulder.

"Awrite," Ward answered. Once again he prepared to step into his ship.

"What about that slice of yours, eh? You gonna let her know yer lightin' out?"

Ward, focused solely on killing Turhan Mot, had let Illara slip his mind. During his time on Callisto, Ward had been singularly, and most uncharacteristically, monogamous.

He turned again to face Mud. He glared at the man. Then he said, "I'll let her know."

"That all? You'll 'let her know'?"

Ward let his shoulders slump, which Mud recognized as a very bad sign. It was the gesture Ward used to loosen his arms, to let them swing in the freest, widest arc. It meant that the next move coming from him would be either a punch in the mouth or a blade in the belly.

Mud let his arms dangle freely at his sides. Yes, the old Ward was back.

"What the hell else, man?" Ward demanded.

Mud just shook his head slowly.

"Just do whatcha think is right," he said.

Without another word, Ward climbed through the hatch and into the O8 111A. Mud took a pace or two backward as Ward caused the ship to lift several inches off the tarmac. He backed his ship out of its berth, then manoeuvred it in a tight circle. Mud raised his hand to wave his friend off, and the O8 111A began to move forward.

Just as the tail of the O8 111A came abreast Mud, he slipped a tiny tracker from a pocket in his utility belt and slapped it on the stern of the ship, below the rear thrusters, a most inconvenient place. He knew that Dimara would instantly recognize the tracker, and would unquestionably alert Ward to the fact of it. But, Mud hoped, the countless details of launching into space from the Space Port would demand all of Ward's attention until they were in space. And knowing Ward's hatred for all extra vehicular activities, Mud also hoped that once they got into space, Ward simply wouldn't bother, knowing that it had been he, Mud, who placed the tracker.

Which, as it happens, is precisely what happened. Mud knew his friend well.

Once into space, after what had proved to be a routine launch, Ward sent Illara a curt message. She saw it while returning from a patrol over Europa, bright text that marched across the visiscreen of her flight helmet.

"Going after Mot. Be back later maybe. Don't wait up, babe."

Illara's eyes watched the letters as they marched across the transparent screen. Beyond, and through the cockpit of her ship, the one she had named 'Izzie', the rings of Jupiter gleamed crimson and purple across the velvet deeps.

All unbelieving she read the letters, and the words they made. She had known for some time that this moment must come, known it in Ward's manner, she saw it in his eyes. But still it seemed unbelievable to her that this inevitable moment had finally come. However prepared she had made herself for this moment, it was but barely enough.

The letters tracked across her visiscreen. Her eyes clung to the word 'babe', the only endearment he ever used with her, until it, like all the words before it, marched off into nothingness.

Illara found her throat tighten. It was hard, painful to breathe.

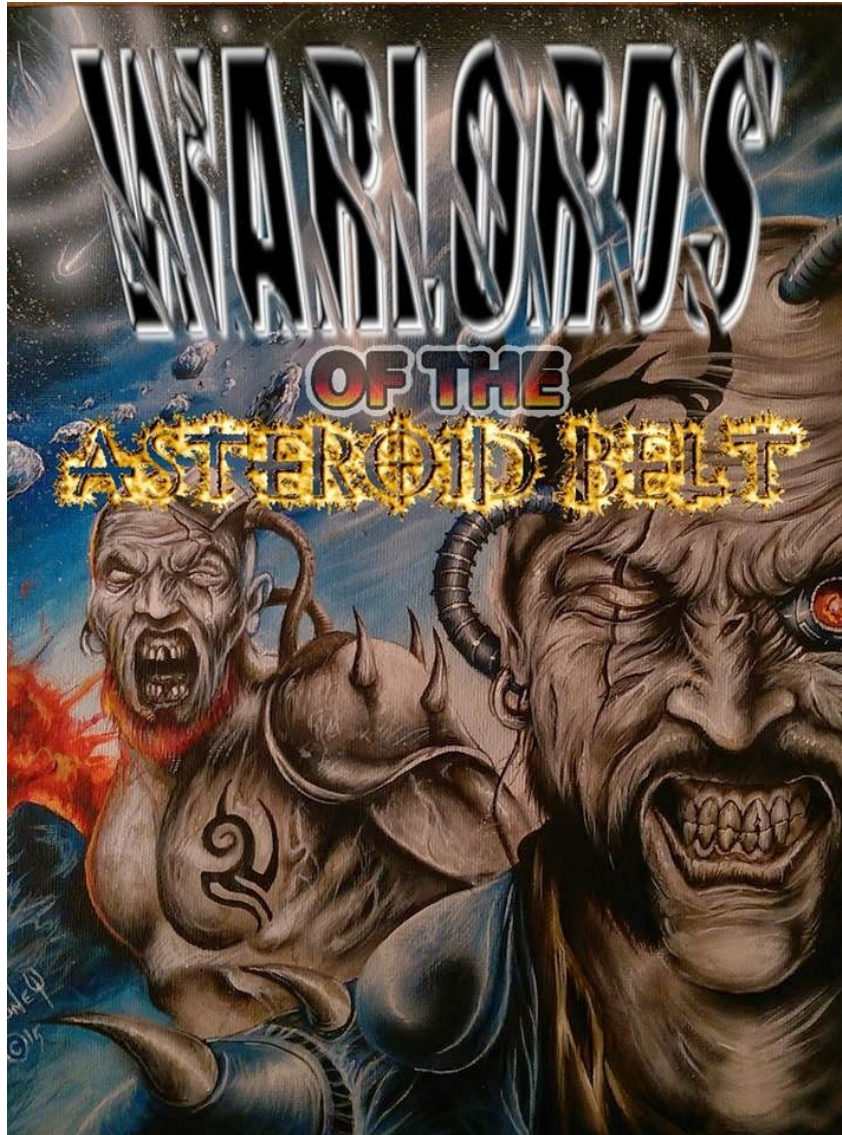
Yeah, Mud was right, Ward had to admit. She did deserve to hear a straight up goodbye. Stringin' her along would'a just been bad manners.

He turned his attention to setting his ship on its course.

And that course was to find Turhan Mot, and to slice his icy throat.

CONTINUES IN THE NEW YEAR

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



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

[Return to Contents](#)

THE WAR OF THE WORLDS by HG Wells

Book One: The Coming of The Martians

Chapter Four: The Cylinder Opens

When I returned to the common the sun was setting. Scattered groups were hurrying from the direction of Woking, and one or two persons were returning. The crowd about the pit had increased, and stood out black against the lemon yellow of the sky—a couple of hundred people, perhaps. There were raised voices, and some sort of struggle appeared to be going on about the pit. Strange imaginings passed through my mind. As I drew nearer I heard Stent's voice:

“Keep back! Keep back!”

A boy came running towards me.

“It's a-movin’,” he said to me as he passed; “a-screwin’ and a-screwin’ out. I don't like it. I'm a goin’ ‘ome, I am.”

I went on to the crowd. There were really, I should think, two or three hundred people elbowing and jostling one another, the one or two ladies there being by no means the least active.

“He's fallen in the pit!” cried someone.

“Keep back!” said several.

The crowd swayed a little, and I elbowed my way through. Everyone seemed greatly excited. I heard a peculiar humming sound from the pit.

“I say!” said Ogilvy; “help keep these idiots back. We don't know what's in the confounded thing, you know!”

I saw a young man, a shop assistant in Woking I believe he was, standing on the cylinder and trying to scramble out of the hole again. The crowd had pushed him in.

The end of the cylinder was being screwed out from within. Nearly two feet of shining screw projected. Somebody blundered against me, and I narrowly missed being pitched onto the top of the screw. I turned, and as I did so the screw must have come out, for the lid of the cylinder fell upon the gravel with a ringing concussion. I stuck my elbow into the person behind me, and turned my head towards the Thing again. For a moment that circular cavity seemed perfectly black. I had the sunset in my eyes.

I think everyone expected to see a man emerge—possibly something a little unlike us terrestrial men, but in all essentials a man. I know I did. But, looking, I presently saw something stirring within the shadow: greyish billowy movements, one above another, and then two luminous disks—like eyes. Then something resembling a little grey snake, about the thickness of a walking stick, coiled up out of the writhing middle, and wriggled in the air towards me—and then another.

A sudden chill came over me. There was a loud shriek from a woman behind. I half turned, keeping my eyes fixed upon the cylinder still, from which other tentacles were now projecting, and began pushing my way back from the edge of the pit. I saw astonishment giving place to horror on the faces of the people about me. I heard inarticulate exclamations on all sides. There was a general movement backwards. I saw the shopman struggling still on the edge of the pit. I found myself alone, and saw the people on the other side of the pit running off, Stent among them. I looked again at the cylinder, and ungovernable terror gripped me. I stood petrified and staring.

A big greyish rounded bulk, the size, perhaps, of a bear, was rising slowly and painfully out of the cylinder. As it bulged up and caught the light, it glistened like wet leather.

Two large dark coloured eyes were regarding me steadfastly. The mass that framed them, the head of the thing, was rounded, and had, one might say, a face. There was a mouth under the eyes, the lipless brim of which quivered and panted, and dropped saliva. The whole creature heaved and pulsated convulsively. A lank tentacular appendage gripped the edge of the cylinder, another swayed in the air.

Those who have never seen a living Martian can scarcely imagine the strange horror of its appearance. The peculiar V shaped mouth with its pointed upper lip, the absence of brow ridges, the absence of a chin beneath the wedgelike lower lip, the incessant quivering of this mouth, the Gorgon groups of tentacles, the tumultuous breathing of the lungs in a strange atmosphere, the evident heaviness and painfulness of movement due to the greater gravitational energy of the earth—above all, the extraordinary intensity of the immense eyes—were at once vital, intense, inhuman, crippled and monstrous. There was something fungoid in the oily brown skin, something in the clumsy deliberation of the tedious movements unspeakably nasty. Even at this first encounter, this first glimpse, I was overcome with disgust and dread.

Suddenly the monster vanished. It had toppled over the brim of the cylinder and fallen into the pit, with a thud like the fall of a great mass of leather. I heard it give a peculiar thick cry, and forthwith another of these creatures appeared darkly in the deep shadow of the aperture.

I turned and, running madly, made for the first group of trees, perhaps a hundred yards away; but I ran slantingly and stumbling, for I could not avert my face from these things.

There, among some young pine trees and furze bushes, I stopped, panting, and waited further developments. The common round the sand pits was dotted with people, standing like myself in a half-fascinated terror, staring at these creatures, or rather at the heaped gravel at the edge of the pit in which they lay. And then, with a renewed horror, I saw a round, black object bobbing up and down on the edge of the pit. It was the head of the shopman who had fallen in, but showing as a little black object against the hot western sun. Now he got his shoulder and knee up, and again he seemed to slip back until only his head was visible. Suddenly he vanished, and I could have fancied a faint shriek had reached me. I had a momentary impulse to go back and help him that my fears overruled.

Everything was then quite invisible, hidden by the deep pit and the heap of sand that the fall of the cylinder had made. Anyone coming along the road from Chobham or Woking would have been amazed at the sight—a dwindling multitude of perhaps a hundred people or more

standing in a great irregular circle, in ditches, behind bushes, behind gates and hedges, saying little to one another and that in short, excited shouts, and staring, staring hard at a few heaps of sand. The barrow of ginger beer stood, a queer derelict, black against the burning sky, and in the sand pits was a row of deserted vehicles with their horses feeding out of nosebags or pawing the ground.

CONTINUES IN THE NEW YEAR

[Return to Contents](#)