

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

**VOL. 11, ISSUE 26
13 AUGUST 2017**

MY FRIEND BILL

**BY DENNIS WAYNE
SMITH—
INTO THE DANGER
ZONE...**

SPECIAL HALF-PIPE

**BY GARY
MURPHY—
ABJECT
HORROR...**

RUMOURS OF WAR BY GAVIN CHAPPELL

METRO ZOO

**BY DAVID B
HARRINGTON**

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Smith, David B Harrington, Gregory KH Bryant, Johann August Apel, Jules Verne, H Rider
Haggard*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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[EDITORIAL](#)

[SPECIAL HALF-PIPE](#) by Gary Murphy— *Abject horror...* HORROR

[MY FRIEND BILL](#) by Dennis Wayne Smith— *Into the Danger Zone...* GHOST STORY

[METRO ZOO](#) by David B Harrington— *I could feel the hair on the back of my neck bristle...* HORROR

[RUMOURS OF WAR](#) by Gavin Chappell— *'And then everything went quiet,' Norman said...* SWORD AND SORCERY

[THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO](#) Episode Nineteen by Gregory KH Bryant— *Subatomic sparks rained down upon the frozen purple plains...* SCIENCE FICTION

[TALES OF THE DEAD](#) by Johann August Apel— *The Spectre Barber...* GOTHIC HORROR

[THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND](#) Part Three: Chapter Five by Jules Verne— *All was explained...* SCIENCE FICTION CLASSIC

[THE WANDERER'S NECKLACE](#) Book Two: Chapter Eight by H Rider Haggard— *The Hall of the Pit...* CLASSIC VIKING FANTASY

[ROGUE PLANET PRESS SUBMISSIONS CALL](#)

EDITORIAL

This week, revenge turns sour for two besotted teenagers. Atomic testing forms a backdrop for an eerie tale of friendship. Mr Strauss has a slippery encounter at the zoo. And we learn the truth behind the demonic haunting of Tito's tavern.

The Scroungers forge their way ever closer to Callisto Base 1. We hear the tale of the Spectre Barber. Explanations result in further mysteries for the settlers on Lincoln Island. And a blinded Olaf suffers in the Hall of the Pit.

—Gavin Chappell

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[Return to Contents](#)

SPECIAL HALF-PIPE by Gary Murphy

“Jesus,” Jay Carling enthused, “That’s the greatest half-pipe I’ve ever committed to film...” He aimed the JVC camcorder towards his airborne best buddy Ricky Gordon, as he flipped and propelled his skateboard and somersaulted twice than thrice through the air, above Cheese Dip Skater Park in this tiny district of Birmingham in the UK.

Out of breath, and still on his skateboard, Ricky drew to a sharp halt beside his friend, grinning, and gestured for Jay to pass him a chilled can of beer out of the backpack by his feet. “Man,” he said, “Look at me, mate—the sweat is pissing out of me...just pass me an ice-cold Fosters and I’m happy for the day!”

Giggling insanely, Jay obliged whilst grabbing one, too.

Together, they slurped the best Australian lager ever canned and chewed on sweet homemade flapjack, loaded with extra honey and a mixture of varied chewy seeds and soft nuts, concocted by 18-year-old Jay’s mum this morning before they set off out into the city on the train.

One thing, though, that Jay despised about his friend Ricky, was his continued interest in Jay’s girlfriend, Sandra Mays, since at 18 like both them, she was the hottest babe and blond-haired vixen studying at their college. A girl who was so scatty and dippy, she was also a girl that could never make her mind up as regards to who exactly was her official boyfriend at any given time. Currently, Jay liked to believe it was him—they held hands, they kissed, they screwed—and Hell, she was the greatest fuck in the world!

She used her tongue expertly, as well—and had the power and suction of a Dyson vacuum cleaner. What more could a boy ask for? And apart from this, at weekends, she caught the train to London, where she went for photo-shoots making a little money as a fashion model for various top-end firms based in the capital.

But Ricky was overstepping the mark lately and Jay was understandably jealous of him showing her all that uncalled-for attention—and even the attention Sandra reciprocated when, say, they went to the movies, did a little window shopping in town, or the many times they’d go clubbing and dancing...yes, dancing... she sometimes wanted to dance with Ricky, and her official boyfriend Jay just sat there in a corner of the room with his Guinness and Black, bored shitless on his own amid the thunderous noise of House and Trance beats.

Everything centred on inner-city dance-floors in this era. The very order of the day (or night) was House Music and Trance...It was all teenagers listened to, at least when they were not indoors (usually upstairs) playing their Xbox One, shooting zombies, or driving along Miami beachfronts in fast cars, searching for arms-dealers or drug-dealers to shoot or mow down and leave by the roadside before moving on to the next big challenge—more of the damned same—every time.

Jay and Ricky played their share of videogames, it was true to say. It was 2017—who didn’t?

Kids would kill nowadays for a brand-new Xbox game, make no mistake. From 9 years upwards, many girls and boys wished to dominate the planet, and bloodily execute any of

those poor fuckers that happened to stumble along or get in their way of obtaining certain power.

But Jay had suffered enough.

He surprised Ricky by saying, “I poisoned your flapjack with arsenic. I’m sick of you hitting on my girl. Sandra loves me and nobody else, and especially not a dork like you...someone about to die and no longer pose as a threat, not to me, and not to my girlfriend. When Sandra and I leave college, I’m going to ask her to marry me. I’ll get a job; she’ll start modelling full-time and make loads of money, and we’ll travel around the world, live in luxury, and we’ll have kids, lots of kids...and some cats and dogs.”

Grinning crookedly, Ricky said, “You’re fucking deluded, pal. Sandra is her own girl and once she grows bored with you she’ll move on to the next sucker. Oh yeah, she’s good-looking and a very fine specimen, but you’ve heard that beauty is only skin-deep? And that’s exactly the case with her...she’ll give you your overwhelming blowjobs at this very time, yes, but only until she yearns for another cock. Then, believe me my friend, she will move onto the next...”

“You’re talking through your arse, Ricky. We’re in love and it will last forever.” Tears welled in Jay’s eyes, and he added after a rough swallow that hurt his throat, “Besides, I just went and poisoned you, old friend... you won’t be around for much longer to see anything transpire between Sandra and me, whether it works out for us or not. You’ll be six feet under and rotting away in a grave.”

“What would you say if I second-guessed a prick like you and switched the flapjacks? And that it was I all along who planned on doing a creepy rat like you in? I’ve thought about doing it for a long while. I’m growing sick of your jealousy, your slurs about Sandra and other boys...boys, like you and me, that are screwing the arse off her most nights of the fucking week—whilst SANDRA LOVES EVERY SECOND OF IT!”

“You switched the flapjack?”

Ricky chuckled as he surveyed the vicinity. His eyes widened as he spotted a figure approaching from the distance. “Oh look,” he said, “Here’s Sandra coming over...” He waved his hand dramatically to attract her attention, which he did and she waved back, her perfectly white teeth visible from even this distance. He yelled, “Hi, Sandra—over here!”

Jay was resolute and determined as he picked up his skateboard. “If I’m about to die, I’ll hit my very last half-pipe...my idea of Heaven. Tell that bitch we’re finished...I don’t want sloppy seconds off anyone, least of all that slut!”

Ricky said, “She’s not a slut, Jay. She just likes screwing around. For example, I take my turn tonight. I’ll be thinking of you with every pump I make.”

“Bastard...”

Jay skated away as Sandra entered the park through the gates across the expanse of concrete. Ricky watched Jay skate away. He felt saddened. He’d lost his best friend—the best friend who was about to poison him today—so not such a best friend after all. But despite

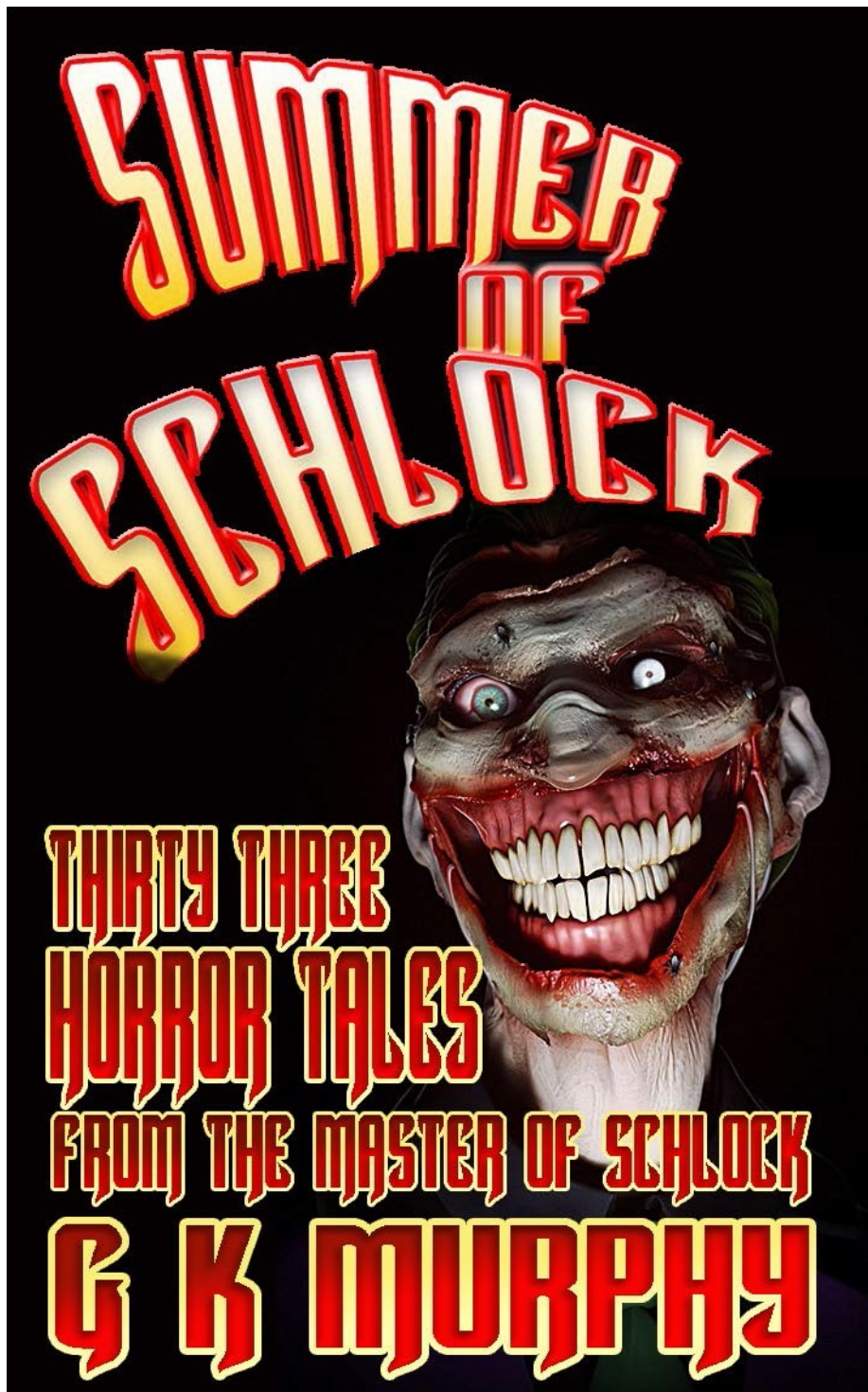
everything, he figured he'd join the traitor for another skate. Another great half-pipe just to thrill his old buddy before he finally croaked. What a fantastic way to go, though—drifting on a greased skateboard. And it would be Ricky screwing the hottest chick in these parts tonight. So—out of deepest sympathy and goodwill for his oldest friend—Ricky wheeled over the concrete towards Jay to enjoy one last skate with him.

Sandra paused to marvel at their gift for navigating the concrete. It took some doing those stunts, flips, as well as the great speed they maintained. Just then she coughed and spluttered, as she lifted her hands to her throat in pain. Something wasn't right. Her throat constricted and grew tighter. She looked down into her hands where she held the honey-filled slab of homemade flapjack. She realized to her abject horror and panic, the morsel was to blame. Little did Sandra know, she was experiencing the tell-tale signs indicative that the teen beauty had been poisoned—and she realized this as she collapsed to the ground. The arsenic worked quicker on some than others. Nobody had an easy run.

Karma was a bitch.

THE END

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[Return to Contents](#)

MY FRIEND BILL by Dennis Wayne Smith

Is this a horror story? I'd rather not use that word because it involves one of my very best friends in the distant past, and there was no horror in the event I will describe. Let's just say extremely unsettling (to me at least), and you might term it as a paranormal event, whatever that is, and let it go at that. It is a true story, believe what you will of it or what you won't. It happened. I just want to get it on paper. Yes, I have dreams, but the event that causes them WAS NOT a dream.

As I sit here at my computer writing this story I don't see any fiery sunrises or golden sunsets or dark clouds looming, or sense some aura about me, and I didn't wake up trembling when the alarm went off (I don't even have an alarm clock) or any of that nonsense. I am up early, as usual, after one of "those" dreams of which I've had so many over the years. The same dream. Me talking to my best friend, Bill, close to the bow of our ship, The USS Henry County (nicknamed "The Hawk"). The same conversation over and over, word for word. But that will be told in this story. I have been reluctant to tell my story for obvious reasons. Back then I didn't dare tell it for fear of being medically discharged from the Navy for being a nut-job, and for years afterwards because of my work in security which sometimes brought me into contact with the government. But now retired and a disabled veteran, what difference does it make? Maybe therapy for me by getting it out and talking about it? Maybe and maybe not. It's worth a try.

I joined the Navy in Hammond, Indiana in 1960. After boot camp in San Diego I was assigned to The USS Henry County, a landing ship tank assigned to Amphibious Forces. Our job was to carry troops and their tanks. Hit the beach, open the huge bow doors, and they would roll off ashore and we would pull off and head back to sea. We only had a crew of a hundred and ninety-two men, including officers. We also had a flat bottom which meant we bounced and wallowed a lot to wherever we were going. After going onboard and getting settled in I was assigned to the engineering department. I would be working as a boiler technician. I started out as a fireman apprentice and then fireman and was soon promoted to Boiler Technician 3rd Class and was then put in charge of the boiler room. That was as high as I rose in the four years I served.

The day after I boarded the Hawk many of the crew members came to me and introducing themselves and told me where they were from. One of the guys was Bill Baylor, a tall and lanky, dark haired sailor from Hershey, Pennsylvania. We hit it off immediately, and soon became best buddies. Bill had come aboard only three weeks before I had. Bill was an Engineman and rose in rank right along with me.

We had many adventures in California. One of our favourite places to meet girls was Knotts Berry Farm, an old western style ghost town set up for visitors. One day, while there, we met Cindy and Carol, who were sisters. Carol was one year older than Cindy. We hit it off big time. I gravitated toward Cindy immediately and Bill did the same with Carol. It's always been amazing to me how things like that work out.

Cindy wanted to be in the movies. She wanted to take acting lessons and get a real screen test. She showed me her card where she had already joined the Screen Actors Guild. Cindy had been in a movie called Flower Drum Song earlier that year.

“It was just a bit part,” she said. She didn’t have any lines. She was just a young woman walking down a street in San Francisco. She smiled remembering it all. “It lasted about five seconds, but you can plainly see me. And best of all, it didn’t get cut. And, they paid me a hundred bucks.”

I was duly impressed and said so. A hundred bucks was a lot of money at that time.

We would often meet them in Long Beach (we, of course, didn’t have a car) and go to the movies at a theatre in Long Beach. We four saw the first James Bond movie, “Dr. No”, and I became a big Bond fan. We would walk through The Pike Amusement Park and smooch a little behind the buildings. I really liked Cindy but felt a little guilty at times because I had a girl back home. Her name was Linda Isaacs and she had the most beautiful long black hair in the world. She was also beautiful. We had ‘gone steady’ for a couple of years before I joined the Navy and had discussed our possible future together. I received a letter from Linda at least twice a month and I always wrote back. I had talked with Bill about her several times. But Bill was hung up on us going to Australia after the Navy. He constantly talked about it. According to Bill we could become rich in Australia mining for opals, which, he said, were everywhere down under. His plan was that we would go to San Francisco after the Navy and catch a steamer headed for Australia. We would work below decks in the boiler room for free passage. Bill had it all figured out. He said, “We’ll only be gone a couple of years and you can go back and marry Linda with plenty of money in your pockets.” He had talked me into it.

All the fun would soon be over. At the end of 1961 Russia resumed nuclear weapons testing, ordered by Khrushchev. In early 1962 President John Kennedy announced we would do the same to answer the threat. The Henry County was selected to be one of the ships participating in the tests. We steamed out of Long Beach on July 12, 1962, headed for Pearl Harbour, Hawaii where we would re-supply food, fuel and fresh water. From there we would steam to what was termed the “Johnston/Christmas Island Danger Zone”, designated “Operation Dominic.” The Hawk was part of Joint Task Force 8. The base we would operate from would be Johnston Island which was eight hundred and twenty-three nautical miles SSW of Hawaii. We would be steaming between Johnston and Christmas Island, participating in the tests.

After nine days at sea we sighted Diamond Head lying off our starboard side. We continued down to enter the channel that would lead us to the Pearl Harbour Naval Base where we would tie up.

The next night after berthing at a pier, a sailor they called Suds, who was a ship fitter (welder), and Bill and I hit the beach. We stopped at a little bar out on Waikiki that advertised live entertainment. We went in. The live entertainment was a long-haired girl sitting on a stool, picking a guitar and singing folk songs. She wasn’t very good but she was giving it her all. We found us a table over in a corner and ordered draft beer. We discussed the upcoming deployment to the Johnston/Christmas Island Danger Zone for these nuclear tests. Suds had known a couple of guys who were on Bikini for tests back in 1958. One was now dead and one was dying.

“It’s not a good thing, guys. Not good at all. We will, more or less, be guinea pigs. I just don’t want to be one of the poor guys who has to go topside to take radiation readings after they drop one of those bastards. I want my rear to be deep, deep below decks.”

I went to the bar and got us three more drafts. While waiting for them to be pulled, I chatted with the folk singer. Her name was LuAnn and she was from Columbus, Ohio. She played these gigs (as she called them) while attending the University of Hawaii. When I asked her why she didn’t stay in Columbus and go to Ohio State she stared at me as if I had gone daft. I grabbed our beers and headed back to the table. When I arrived, the conversation had changed. Bill and Suds were in a discussion about poetry. Bill was talking about a man named Shelley, a name I vaguely remembered from high school literature class. Suds said Shelley had a fascination with death. “Just read his Queen Mab’ and you’ll see what I mean.” Bill said he had read it and it was one of his favourites.

Bill said, “Death has a beauty of its own and, in fact, may be the most beautiful part of life.”

I was a little surprised when Suds said, “I’ve heard you write a little poetry” and Bill said, “I dabble at it. It’s not very good but I enjoy it.”

They were thinking out of my league so I just sat there sipping my beer. Bill sensed this and said, “Do you have a favourite poet, Den?”

I said, “Well, I sorta like that Poe guy, I guess, and the poem where he looks for El Dorado. I guess that’s about it.”

Suds smiled as if I had said I preferred comic books to John Steinbeck. Bill picked up on that and quickly said, “Poe has always been under-appreciated. He was actually an extremely profound writer.” I didn’t know where Bill was getting words like ‘profound’ from, but I was glad to see it wipe the smirk off Suds’ face.

There wasn’t much action going on in the little bar and we didn’t care. We were all three worn out and ready to go hit our racks early. LuAnn was demolishing “Red River Valley” as we went out the door.

At muster the next morning it was announced that three men had been chosen to attend radiology school for five days. These men were:

Second Class Electrician’s Mate, Howard Sayers
Third Class Boiler Technician, Dennis Smith
Third Class Engineman, William Baylor

There were over eighty men in the radiology class. Larger ships had as many as a dozen men on their radiology teams. The Hawk was small so she rated just three. The class was taught by a chief warrant officer who claimed to have a degree in physics. We were each issued a numbered Mueller-Geiger counter that we had to sign for. Each man would be responsible for the care and maintenance of his counter until the end of the tests when they would be turned in.

We were instructed in calibrating the instruments to take radiation readings. These readings would be read as roentgens. We also learned about ionizing radiation and its “half-life.” We were told about alpha and beta particles and gamma rays. We were trained in “wash down” procedures and the “base surge” that would emanate from the detonation of an atomic bomb, much like the circle that radiated from a stone being thrown into a pond, only tremendously bigger in scale. This was a huge wave that would slap the side of a ship causing it to list severely on the opposite side.

Three days after the classes ended we pulled away from our pier and headed down the channel and to the sea on our way to Johnston Island, which was really just an atoll.

There was an unnatural stillness about the base as the Hawk steamed slowly up the channel headed for the open sea. It was still dark with a faint light to the east. No other vessels were moving in either direction. I was alone on the fantail with my thoughts. I thought about Linda and I thought about Bill and I going to Australia. Maybe it would all work out. I threw my cigarette overboard and headed below decks.

The farther we steamed southwest the more reality seemed to become suspended. Even the sea looked different. Darker. No phosphorus streaks brightened the wake behind the Hawk. Stars were becoming rare. It was impossible to tell where the sky ended and the sea started. There was no horizon. A black dome seemed to have been placed over the sea where the Hawk was steaming. Even breathing was difficult. On our third night of steaming, it seemed that every man not on watch was topside. The old salts who had been at sea for years had bewildered looks on their faces. Old Doc Bailey, a Chief Corpsman, who had sailed on all seven seas, shook his head. “These latitudes are not meant for men. This is Satan’s playground. Satan and his demons.”

Just as Doc finished his sentence the southern sky flashed a bright white light. Brighter than any sun. Then it turned a greenish hue and then it was gone. Somebody said, “What in God’s name?”

Doc said, “That was a nuclear air burst. And we haven’t even reached our destination yet, where we’re going to see the bastards up close for real.” A light rain started to fall. We all headed below decks.

At 0500 hours on the third day we began approaching Johnston Island.

We anchored a thousand yards out from the break-wall that had been built around the atoll. Standing on the main deck you could see the sea on the other side. There was a short runway running the length of the atoll. Men and equipment were moving about.

We watched a 4-engine cargo plane coming in on final. You could hear him cut back on the engines while he was still skimming the water’s surface. The nose-wheel touched down just where the runway met the water. The pilot knew it was a short runway and he was good. We could hear his brakes squeal as he brought the plane to a stop thirty yards before the pavement ran out.

Somebody said, “Jesus Christ!”

Mr. Ligan, the Engineering Officer, called the engineers together. We were all issued a dosimeter--a small, black round object that would hang from a cord around our necks. We were told these would be "read" from time to time to detect how many roentgens we were being exposed to. They never were. The "uniform of the day" would be t-shirts and dungaree pants because of the heat.

Bill, Howard Sayers and I were seated on the deck just inside the port hatch. We were all three wearing asbestos fire-fighting suits. Sweat was pouring from our bodies inside the suits. The only part not made of asbestos was the plexiglass in front of our eyes to see through. Howard muttered something about us looking like creatures from a B-grade science fiction movie. My body was itching. My face was itching. There was no way to scratch. Howard said he was having trouble breathing. We each were holding our Mueller-Geiger counters. Johnston Island was radioing messages that were being piped throughout the ship. One phrase was repeated over and over.

"APRIL WEATHER—APRIL WEATHER—APRIL WEATHER."

We had no idea what it meant.

We knew a B-52 had left Hickam headed our way with a payload. It would be a surface drop of a multi-megaton nuclear bomb. It would be detonated at a certain altitude for the "rainbow effect." These drops were designated "air-bursts." We had no idea where the Hawk's position would be in relation to this drop. The damage control teams were seated in the mess hall below us. The rest of the crew were at their General Quarters

stations. This drop was designated "Shot Chama." We had no idea what that meant either. The countdown was blared throughout the ship.

"D—MINUS TEN MINUTES."

We three looked at each other. Howard shrugged—that was all he knew to do.

"D -MINUS TWENTY SECONDS19...18...17...16...15....14...13...
12...11...10...9...8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1."

The overhead lights blinked off and on. I could hear the engines changing speeds trying to maintain some sort of station. The engines shut down. There was silence. The speakers blared. "Brace for base surge." We had been warned about the "base surge" in radiology school. "Ten seconds to base surge—9...8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1..."

It was like a giant's hand had slapped the side of the Hawk. I was thrown against the bulkhead behind me. Bill's head slammed into the bulkhead behind him. Howard hung on to a rung to keep from being thrown down the ladder to the next deck. The Hawk took a twenty-degree list to starboard and then bobbed back up on an even keel.

On the deck under us we could hear the damage control parties.

“What the hell!”

“Mary, Mother of God.”

The ship’s speakers crackled, “Damage control teams to port and starboard shaft alleys for damage inspection. Report to CIC. Radiology team lay topside.”

That was us. We got the hatch undogged and stepped outside. The heat was worse than inside. Daylight was just breaking. The sky on the southern horizon was unnaturally white with a greenish hue. It was like being on another planet, looking at an alien sky.

We headed out in different directions. I went midships on the starboard side, working my way forward. I slowly ran the counter’s probe wand over the railing. The meter fluctuated between 30 and 40 roentgens. I ran it over a hose rack and it hit 50 roentgens as the clicks per minute increased. These were pretty much the average readings I received over my area. I dutifully logged in locations and the readings. The radiology team met back at the port hatch thirty minutes later. Howard’s reading had been about the same as mine. So were Bill’s, except for the forward gun mount where his needle had pegged. We noticed the greenish hue in the sky had become larger. Then the rain came. We headed below decks, stripped down and hit the showers. Doc stationed himself outside the shower stalls with his own Geiger Counter. I had my shower running with only cold water. It felt good. I let it hit me full in the face for a long time, trying to get rid of the stink of the damned asbestos suit, before I started soaping down. Howard came out first. He stood with his arms out and legs spread while Doc ran the wand over him. There was no clicking from the Geiger counter. I came out next and assumed the position. Doc pronounced me “clean.” Bill came out. There was some clicking under his right armpit. He went back into the shower. When he came back out, the clicking continued. He headed back into the shower. When he came back out the third time the clicking had stopped. Bill was clean.

Mr. Lingan came in and talked with us while we were getting dressed. He looked at our logs and whistled when he saw the high readings Bill had picked up in the forward gun mount. He said, “I need to get these up to the captain, right away,” and took off with the log sheets.

That night Bill and I sauntered into the mess hall at a little before 2000 hours to get a good seat for the movie. I asked the electrician’s mate setting up the projector the name of the movie. He said, “It’s called Flower Drum Song; it’s a good movie.” I thought of Cindy. He started to add something else but I cut him off.

“That’s okay,” I said

I headed back to my rack. I climbed in and read a western by Max Brand until I fell asleep.

The next test was two days later. This time the weapon would be carried aloft by a Thor missile and detonated in the ionosphere above us. All hands were required to observe this one. It was designated “Blue Bird.” We were each issued a pair of dark goggles with one-inch thick lens. At 0100 hours, we were all seated topside with our knees pulled up. Even with the

goggles you had to bury your head into your arms because the initial flash would blind you. The control room on the island was coming through the ship's speakers.

"The blue bird has left the island—stand by"—We didn't need to be told that. We were close enough to see the Thor missile lift from its pad and hear the roar and see the flame. It quickly disappeared into the blackness of the night. We waited. Then the countdown.

"D—minus 30 seconds."

We buried our heads and closed our eyes.

"10—9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1."

With the goggles on, my face buried in my arms, and my eyes shut, I still saw a flash of light. We waited. The speakers came alive. "All Hands May Now Observe Detonation."

We removed our goggles and looked up. The sky was on fire. A deep, dark, boiling red, covering the entire sky. There seemed to be lightning bolts flashing through it. There were audible gasps all around me. I heard an unknown voice somewhere behind me "Now we know what hell looks like." Somebody else said, "The hell we do, this shit would scare the piss out of Satan." Then a band of light appeared, arcing from horizon to horizon. The ship's speaker came alive telling us we were looking at the Van Allen Radiation Belt. We were told that the lights that looked like tracers headed for it was actually ionizing radiation from the detonation being pulled into the belt. Some of the guys had already left. The rest of us went below. Everybody was quiet getting ready to get back into their racks. The usual horseplay and laughter was muted. Somebody propped open an overhead scuttle to let in some air. It was raining again.

We had steamed southeast to Palmyra Island and anchored just outside the lagoon. We were here for what the Navy called R and R (Rest and Relaxation). Hot dogs, hamburgers—we were even allowed beer brought from Johnston Island. Some of the guys were in the lagoon splashing around. A baseball game was underway. Bill, Suds, Howard, several guys from deck force and operations and me had a game of tag football going. The longer our game went the more competitive it became. Pretty soon the "tagging" was replaced by full contact tackling. Bill and Suds and their crew were on the opposite team from me and Howard and our guys. When it finally ended, there were bloody noses and torn t-shirts. I don't even remember which side won but it was great fun. Everybody seemed to be in a good mood as we piled aboard the LCVPs and the sun was setting. Bill set down in a corner of the boat. "Man, I must really be out of shape. Damn, I'm tired and ache in every bone."

I said, "Hell, we all do."

Suds said, "What about an old guy like me? I'm thirty-two years old. How do you guys think I feel? You young whippersnappers shouldn't be tired. Hell, I'm the one who's tired." We all grinned.

Bill didn't feel like eating chow that night. I said, "They've got ice cream. Do you want me to bring you a bowl?" He thought a second. "Nah, I don't think so."

After chow, I went back to the berthing area to get Bill for the movie but he was sound asleep.

I went back to the mess hall and watched a goofy movie called "Duel of the Titans." They were speaking English but it was definitely dubbed in because the actor's lips weren't in sync with the words. Halfway through just about everyone walked out, including me. Reveille came at 0530. When I jumped out of my rack I noticed Bill was already up. I tied a towel around my waist, grabbed my shaving kit and stumbled to the head. An engineman named Mosley was shaving at the sink next to mine. I never cared much for Mosley. He resembled a chipmunk to me. Buck-teeth and all. He said, "Where's your buddy, Baylor?"

I said, "Probably looking for you to whip your butt."

Mosley was patting cheap after shave on his jaws. "No man, I'm serious. He was supposed to stand the mid-watch on the auxiliary engines. I went to wake him up but he wasn't in his rack. Hell, I couldn't find him anywhere. Mac had to take the watch."

I went back to my rack and climbed into my dungarees and boondockers. I headed to the mess hall to grab a cup of coffee and climbed the ladder to the main deck which I did alone most mornings to gather my thoughts and try to catch a breeze of some sort. As I moved forward I saw Bill up by the forward gun tub. When I got to him I said, "Where in hell have you been, buddy? A lot of guys looking for you. You didn't relieve the watch last night." Bill said, "I know I didn't."

That concerned me a little. I said, "Are you okay, Bill"?

He smiled. "Actually, I feel better than I have ever felt in my life."

That also disconcerted me for some reason. Bill had a strange aura about him, as though he was glowing just a little. It had to be the rising sun to his back causing the effect. But he also had a very slight scent of cinnamon about him which made no sense. For some reason, we started talking about our adventures. Carol and Cindy. The fun we had at the Rose Bowl Parade in Pasadena on New Year's Eve, 1960. And watching The Washington Huskies defeat the Minnesota Golden Eagles in the Rose Bowl the next day because two men who were Rose Bowl Officials and Navy veterans had given us tickets the night before and all the fun we had on the Pike Amusement Park in Long Beach chasing the girls and the western sing-alongs at Knotts Berry Farm. We laughed and talked for an hour. Finally, I said, "Let's go get some chow, buddy, before it's all gone. Bill said, "Not now. I'll be down in a little while, maybe." I said, "Make it quick or it will all be gone." As I turned to leave Bill stopped me. Putting his arm around my shoulder he said, "About that Australia thing, that was just a pipe dream, Den. I want you to promise me you'll take care of yourself and go home and marry that raven-haired girl you talk about. She's waiting for you." I said, "How would you know that"? He smiled again, "I just know, believe me I do. Hell, I might even be at the wedding if you'll have me." I said, "We'll talk about it later," and headed down below for some chow. After leaving the mess hall I headed down the passage way that led by sick bay where old Doc Bailey ruled the roost. As I passed the hatch door was open. I noticed someone was on the hospital bed with a sheet over his head. I stuck my head in and said, "Who you got there, Doc?"-He shook his head. "It's your friend Bill, Smitty. I'm afraid we've lost him. He woke me up around 2300 saying he was in pain everywhere. I got him in here and he started throwing up. I gave him something to put him out but he was gone before he even swallowed

it. I stumbled back against the bulkhead. I said, "You're crazy, Doc. I just talked with Bill a short time ago up topside!" Doc reached over and pulled the hatch shut and dogged it down. Doc said, "Listen to me, Smitty! I've been in this man's navy nigh on thirty years. World War Two and the Korean Conflict and I've seen it all. I've seen too many dead men and I've heard what you're saying many times. The bottom line is I believe you talked to Bill on the main deck earlier because I've seen this before. But the fact is, your good friend has been dead close to eight hours and lying right here." He pulled a little of the sheet back. It was Bill. A cold shiver ran down my back and my hands were shaking. Doc grabbed my arm and said, get a hold of yourself. As I've told you, what happened to you is not all that uncommon but if you have any sense at all you'll keep it between us. You want an honourable discharge when you get out and not a Section 8. You wouldn't be able to get a job at a dump. Just let it go, Smitty. I nodded okay but the chill was still with me. Doc said, "I've notified the Captain. A hospital boat is on its way to take Bill back to the Island where he'll be flown to Hawaii and back to Pennsylvania." Doc handed me a key. "In the meantime, I want you to go to his locker and get all his things out and bring them back here so they can go with him. I know you would be the one he would want to do it. The chill was still running up and down my spine as I went to get Bill's sea bag and then to his locker to put all his things in it. While going through his locker I found a piece of paper with Bill's handwriting. It looked as though he had started a poem of some kind but hadn't finished it.

Steaming on A Sea of Red

By William Baylor

Steaming, Steaming, Upon A Sea of Red.
Steaming, Steaming, Upon A Sea of Red.
Dare We Pray Tonight for Sleep or Rest?
Or Would a Moment's Lack of Vigilance Bring
Us That Eternal Sleep That Knows No Sound?
Being Young and Foolish, We Do Not Know.

I slipped the piece of paper into my own pocket and I still have it.

I carried it all back up to sickbay still totally bewildered. When I got back Mr. Lingan was in sick bay. He told me he was sorry about Bill and we shook hands. The loud speaker announced that the hospital boat had pulled alongside. Two of Doc's Corpsmen put Bill on a stretcher and carried him topside. As the stretcher was being lowered to the hospital boat I yelled out, "Be careful with him"! One of the Corpsmen on the boat said, "We will, we will! Don't worry!" Old Doc, Mr. Lingan and Suds and me stood there and watched the boat until it went behind the breakwall at Johnston Island. As we turned to go below decks Doc said he wanted to see me in sick bay. I followed him down. Doc gave me some kind of pill and a glass of water and told me to swallow it. He said, "I'm giving you an 'off duty' slip for today. I want you to get in your rack and stay there. Again, I believe you told the truth but also again, I'm telling you that if you value your future, you'll keep your mouth shut. I nodded in agreement and headed for my rack. I was already growing drowsy. I slept a dreamless sleep for nine hours.

We endured three more surface drops with only Howard and me on the radiology team.

2320: Crew observes high altitude detonation over Johnston Island designated Kingfish. SOPA is CTG 8.3 in USS Princeton. Condition of Readiness V LT. S. Salter USN

We also witnessed three more detonations in the ionosphere, including Shot Kingfish which was in the ships log recorded as above. These were also sent aloft on Thor Missiles. For these we also wore heavy goggles with our heads buried in our laps until the initial flash had passed. Even then you could hear men yell out that they could see their own bones like an X-ray. I saw mine once in my left leg but didn't say anything.

On November 16th, the Hawk was the last ship to depart Johnston Island. We never knew why we were required to stay another three days after everyone else had left. We steamed out of Johnston Harbour at 0500, headed back to Pearl. We were all tired to the bone. We were also hungry for something real to eat. We had run out of groceries a week earlier and we were subsisting on powdered eggs, spam, powdered potatoes and powdered milk. The refrigerated reefer ship that was on its way to Johnston Island to re-supply us never showed up. We had no idea what the situation was on the larger ships. They sure as hell didn't offer us anything.

At 0200 on November 19th we tied up to a pier in Pearl. We hooked up to shore steam, electricity and fresh water. After that the engineering crew was so tired we weren't up to getting undressed and climbing into our racks. We just threw our pillows on deck and flaked out in our dungarees. Early the next morning, the supply trucks were on the pier. The whole crew went down to help bring it aboard—officers, non-coms, E-2s and E-3s—everybody. It seemed we were all after the same thing—ice cream! Everyone was tearing into the five-gallon cardboard tubs of ice cream and eating it with their bare hands. I was right in there with the rest of them.

Friday, December 8, 1962

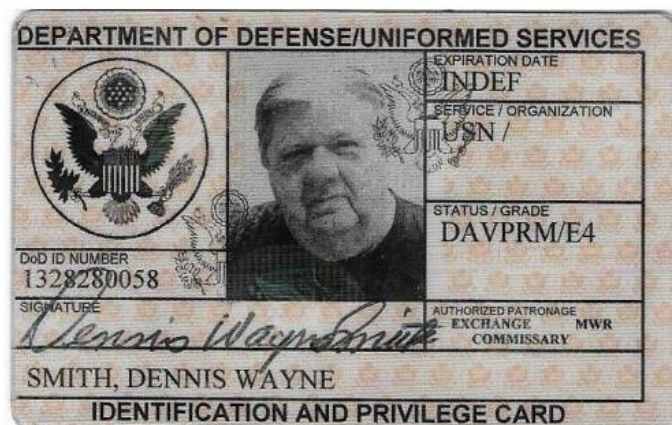
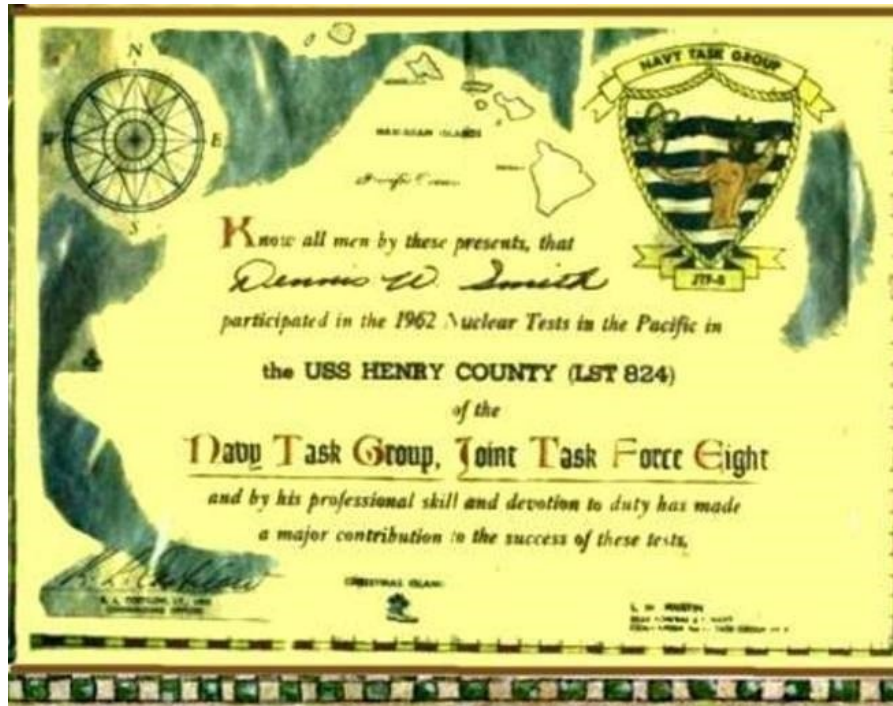
Officer of the Deck Log entry.

16-24 steaming as before. 1612 c/s to 9.3 knots

1624 sighted Point Loma Bearing 075 Distance 25M cls to 2.1 knots. 1630 set special mooring detail—manoeuvring at various courses at various speeds conforming to enter San Diego Harbour channel. Buoy #5 a beam to port—1640 entered inland water—draft fwd 6'3", aft 12'9"—1720 commenced manoeuvring to approach berth—1740 moored starboard side to Navy Pier—Ships present include various units of the US Pacific Fleet and various foreign and domestic merchant vessels. Condition of readiness V.

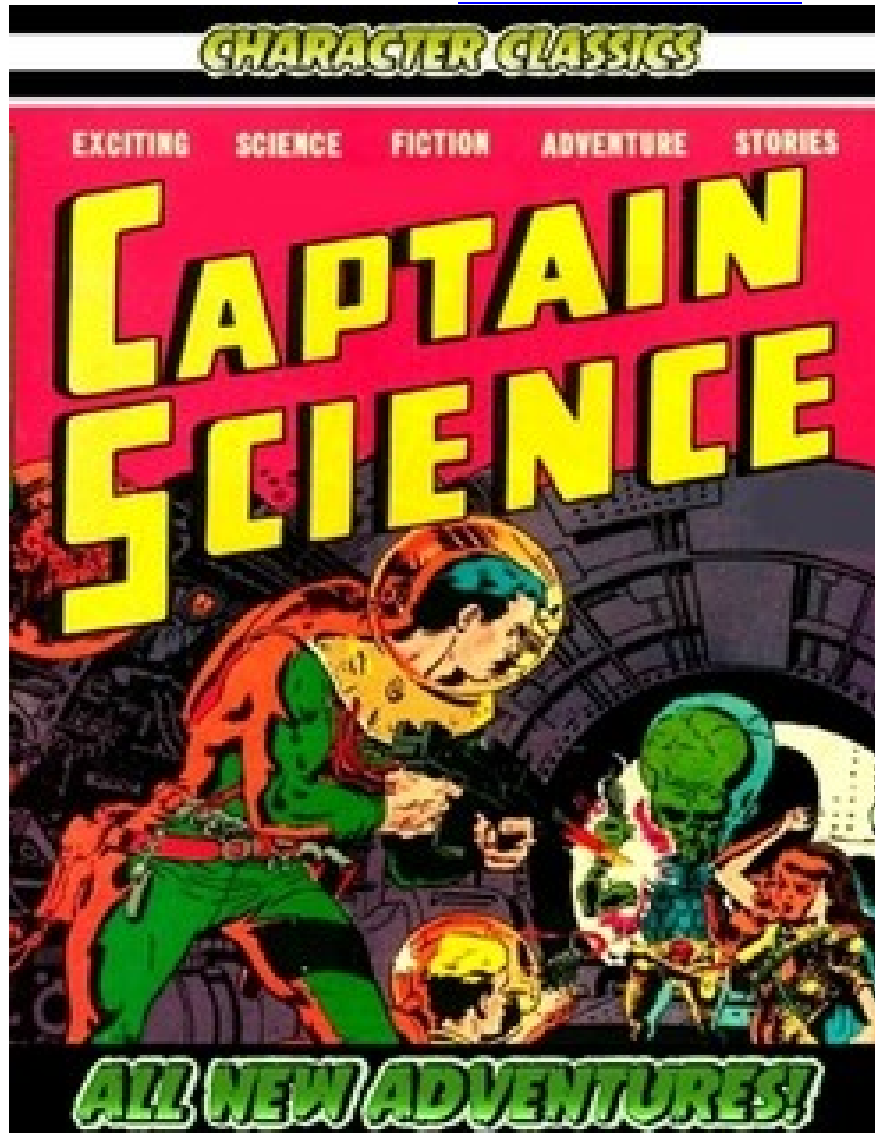
We were home. In August of 1964 I received an Honourable Discharge and headed back to Indiana. The dreams started a month or so after I returned home. Bill and I talking that morning up by the forward gun tub. All of it. Word for word. The scent of cinnamon, the aura of light. Right up to me heading below decks. But it wasn't that often. Maybe once every two

months or so. Everyone aboard the Hawk signed paperwork that nothing we saw or heard at Operation Dominic would not be revealed to anyone for thirty years which would be 1992. And I have honoured that. I went to work for Rand McNally in Hammond and then sold insurance for a while but that was just not for me. I then was trained as a de-coder and went to work for a security firm that had contacts with the government. and Linda and I married a year later. As the years wore on, strangely, the dreams increased. It's now to the point, after all these years, that the same dream comes to me at least once a week and sometimes even more often. It is very stressful on me as I always wake up with a depressed feeling after one of the dreams. I recently finally told my wife about it. My wife was originally from Alabama and after I retired we moved here and have a place on a lake which does have a somewhat of a calming effect. She has tried to help me in every way she can and I don't know what I would do without her. I do have a VA Psychiatrist at the Veterans Hospital in Birmingham who I only see about once a year because of being diagnosed with PTSD from the tests. But I have never discussed the dreams with him. I've told him I have dreams about the tests but don't go into any details as I have here. I also have severe pain in my back and both legs which two VA doctors have told me may very well be caused by the ionizing radiation. I also have asbestos in my lungs from wearing the asbestos fire-fighting suit during the tests and working with asbestos daily down in the boiler room of the Hawk. The VA has me at 90% disabled. Linda is the one who told me I should write about it because it might be therapeutic for me. I can only hope it is. Hoping and praying. I certainly don't mind having dreams about my friend. I would like to have dreams about some of our adventures. But it's the same dream, word for word, over and over. Linda is the one who told me I should write about it because it might be therapeutic for me. I can only hope it is. Hoping and praying.



THE END

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[Return to Contents](#)

METRO ZOO by David B Harrington

As soon as I saw her I knew she was one of them. I could tell by the way she carried herself across the busy intersection and strolled confidently past the old theater, blending in effortlessly with the lunchtime crowd. Like the rest of her kind, she was a beautiful, yet subtle creature who probably led a solitary existence with very little social interaction to speak of except what would only be necessary to fit in comfortably with her natural surroundings. You see, I learned a long time ago, these types of creatures aren't really that difficult to recognize, you just had to know what to look for. She glanced over her shoulder at me as she whisked by the Gothic cathedral. A colorful, carefree chameleon casually going about her business. I knew it wouldn't be long before the animal games began.

From my hotel room on the 7th floor I had a clear view of the park blocks, the fountain, the carousel, and all the partygoers gathered in the cafes and nightclubs below. I watched with vague interest as a steady stream of nightlifers shuffled in and out of the shops and restaurants that line the boulevard. That's when I spotted her sitting all alone sipping a tall drink in front of one of the fancy cafes. I stood by the window and watched her for a few minutes. She turned her head, looked straight up at me and grinned. I quickly closed the curtains, threw on my overcoat and rushed out of the room to the elevators. I dashed through the lobby, out the front doors across the park and busy boulevard. But she must have known I was coming for her because when I got to the cafe, she was gone. Her half-empty glass smudged with lipstick still stood on the table. There was a small group of yuppies hanging out drinking beer nearby. I turned around and said, "Excuse me, but did any of you happen to see which way the woman who was sitting here a minute ago went?"

Clearly annoyed that a complete stranger should have the gall to interrupt their little get together, one of them pointed in the direction of the park and said, "She went that way, buddy."

But that was impossible. I had just cut through the park a moment earlier. I would have run right into her. "Are you sure?" I asked with uncertainty.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

For the next fifteen minutes I scoured the park blocks, searching for her in vain. For I knew she had vanished once again. Back to my suite I went, confused and exhausted, and realized that in my haste I had forgotten to lock the door. I gently pushed it open and peeked inside. The room was dark and empty except for my suitcase which still lay unpacked on the bed. It was then I noticed my phone extension flashing red. The front desk must have called while I was out. I took the elevator down to the lobby and marched right up to the night clerk on duty and said, "Good evening. I'm Mr. Strauss in room 707. I believe you called me about something...?"

"Yes sir, I did," she said pleasantly. "Somebody left you a letter while you were out." She reached down and handed me an envelope with my name and suite number written on it.

"But no one even knows I'm here," I said in a puzzled tone. "Did they leave their name or anything?" I said as I unsealed the envelope. It was a ticket to the Metro Zoo and it was dated for the following day.

“No name. Sorry. She did say she’d see you tomorrow though. A secret admirer perhaps...?”

I chuckled and said, “Tell me, miss. Is this your handwriting by chance?”

“No sir, it is not. Your name and suite number were already on the envelope when she handed it to me.”

“I see. And what exactly did this mystery woman look like, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“No, not at all. Um, let’s see. She was tall and slender. Exceptionally pretty, probably in her late twenties or early thirties, I would say. Very pleasant.”

It had to be the girl from the cafe. Who else could it possibly be? “Interesting,” I mumbled. “One more thing. Do you happen to know if this secret admirer of mine is also a guest here at the hotel?”

“I don’t think so, Mr. Strauss. I don’t recall ever seeing her around before.”

“Well, thank you very much. You’ve been most helpful.” I wondered if I was being lured into some kind of trap. But then I thought, what could possibly happen at a crowded zoo? I went back to my room and watched TV for awhile before nodding off.

The following morning I hopped the 10 o’clock shuttle bus to the Metro Zoo. It was another beautiful sunny day and when I arrived there was already a long line of visitors waiting to get through the gates. I scanned the crowd to see if I could spot her waiting for me, but there was no sign of her anywhere. Inside the plaza, the gift shop and concession stands were packed full of young kids and moms and dads pushing baby strollers. I had to fight my way through a group of elementary school children just to get past the Primate House.

My first stop was the African Safari then on to a new exhibit that had recently opened featuring several species of crocodilians from three different continents. The enclosure was dark, muggy, and extremely uncomfortable like an Amazon rain forest. But the giant reptiles were quite impressive so I hung around in there for a bit. Most of the crocs and gators were just kind of suspended in limbo with their eyes protruding above the murky water watching the little children come and go, wondering which ones would be staying for lunch.

By the time I got out of there my clothes were drenched with perspiration and the sun was blinding my eyes. To my relief I spotted a vacant bench where I could sit down and cool off for a few minutes. As I crossed the path for the sanctuary of the shade, a scrawny looking boy, probably nine or ten years old, suddenly plowed right into me with a big wad of cotton candy in his mouth. I reached out and grabbed his arm to prevent him from falling to the pavement. “Oopsie daisy! Are you alright, kid?” He was wearing dingy khakis and an old tattered jacket. I stooped down until I was eye level with the boy and said, “You really must be more careful and watch where you’re going from now on.”

“Sorry, mister,” he muttered. He seemed distracted and looked right through me. Something else had caught his attention. “Why is that lady staring at you...?”

I spun around to see who he was talking about, but there wasn't anybody there except a couple of maintenance workers and a vendor pawning souvenirs. "What lady...?" I said, but he had already darted off in the opposite direction. Let the animal games begin, I thought.

Behind me was the Aviary, and next to that the Reptile & Amphibian Complex and Conservation Center. She could have easily slipped into either one without me noticing. I searched the Aviary first, but she was definitely not in there. The Reptile & Amphibian Complex was a hexagon-shaped structure with lots of exotic plants and rows of terrariums full of frogs, lizards and snakes. There was even a separate enclave for venomous snakes where only children accompanied by an adult were allowed, so I checked in there, but nothing doing. I walked around full circle and still didn't see her anywhere. I knew she was watching me from somewhere, I could feel it in my veins.

Weary of her childish games, I started down the path toward the gates when I heard a woman's voice say, "Leaving so soon, Danny...?" I turned and there she was, my beautiful elusive butterfly, just sitting there all by herself on the bench with her legs crossed all ladylike, smiling up at me with that malevolent grin. She nonchalantly lowered her sunglasses and our eyes collided. Let me tell you, she was drop-dead gorgeous in her green and yellow sundress and high heels. She had curly blond hair with pink and orange streaks, sapphire-blue eyes, and a black shawl draped over her shoulders.

I cautiously walked toward her. She watched with amusement as I approached, luring me closer and closer. I should have run away right then and there, but I was drawn in by her hypnotic gaze. I sat down right next to her, never turning my eyes away. I could feel the hair on the back of my neck bristle, tickling my skin with a tingly sensation. "Do I know you...?"

"Would you like to...?" she asked sardonically.

"I know who you are."

"Oh, do you now...? Who am I?"

"What the hell do you want from me?" I snapped, already growing agitated by her carefree demeanor.

"Your undivided attention, what else."

"Is that so? You don't own me. I'm not some kind of puppet you can just manipulate anytime you please," I said vindictively. "So unless you have some immediate business with me, I suggest you stop spying on me and leave me alone!"

She uncrossed her legs, looked me straight in the eye and said, "My, my, my, Danny! There's no need to get all testy. That's no way to treat a lady on the first date."

"Stay away from me, I'm warning you, or else I'll..."

"Or else you'll what? Call security? Cage me like a wild animal? Have me removed from the zoo on such a beautiful day? That would be such a shame. Come on, Danny boy. You can do better than that. You oughta know by now, I don't frighten away that easily." She reached

inside her snakeskin purse, pulled out a makeup kit and mirror and started painting her lips, ignoring me as if we had never had this little conversation.

I stood up furiously and said, "That's it! We're done here. I'm leaving now. Goodbye!"

"See you later, Danny. It was nice meeting you too," she cackled.

I turned to walk away. "Stay away from me, do you understand? I mean it!" But she just smirked and continued applying her lipstick. I checked to see if she was following me, but the bench was empty. She had evaporated into the crowd without a trace.

When I got back to the hotel I noticed my suitcase had been moved. There was a clean stack of towels in the bathroom and the carpet had been vacuumed. The maid must have come in and refreshed the room while I was out. Tired and hungry, I decided to take a quick shower and a short nap before heading down to the restaurant for dinner. I grabbed a set of clean clothes from my bag and went into the bathroom. In the mirror I saw something crawl out of my bag and slither across the floor. I stepped out onto the carpet and a creature, which can only be described as the cross between a cobra and a millipede with hundreds of tiny fuzzy feet and antennas, suddenly lunged up at me, lashing its forked tongue and snapping its monstrous mandibles as it flew through the air toward my frightened face. I ducked and the creature slammed against the wall with a deafening crash and started hissing. With my back against the wall, I slowly crept toward the door in hopes of sneaking out into the hall and making a run for it. The creature coiled up into a ball, poising itself to strike again. It started to close in on me when the phone on the nightstand rang. I picked up one of my shoes and hurled it as hard as I could, knocking the receiver off the hook. Bullseye! The receiver tumbled off the cradle and the clerk's concerned voice crackled through the speaker, calling out to me. "Send help!" I shouted. The creature retreated and scurried underneath the bed. I rushed back into the bathroom and barricaded myself against the door. I heard the creature slam hard up against the door several times, then it stopped and everything got quiet. A few moments later the phone rang again. How was that even possible?

After what seemed like an eternity, I heard somebody banging on the door. "Mr. Strauss, are you in there...? It's hotel security. Is everything alright?"

"Yes, I'm here! But there's a snake loose in my room and I'm trapped in the bathroom. Please hurry!" I pleaded.

"Alright, stay calm. I'm coming in!"

I heard him unlock the door and enter the room. I cracked open the bathroom door and peeked around the corner. The creature was still under the bed. I stepped out of the bathroom with just a towel wrapped around my waist. I must have looked totally ridiculous standing there half naked as white as a ghost. "Um, are you alright, sir...?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Just a bit shaken. Now I insist you get me out of here at once!"

"Yes, of course. I'll get you another room right away. Please follow me, sir. I'll come back for your bag in a moment." I tip-toed over to the door, staying as far away from the bed as possible and hurried out into the hallway. He escorted me to a vacant suite just down the hall. "Please wait here while I notify the front desk and retrieve your bag. And don't worry, I'll

check your bag thoroughly to make sure it is safe.” He returned with my bag fifteen minutes later and I crawled into bed.

As I checked out the next morning, I was pleasantly surprised when the clerk issued me a full refund for my two night’s stay and apologized for all the inconvenience. I hailed a cab to the train station and arrived about a half an hour early. I had a little time to kill before my train was due to depart, so I picked up the phone and dialed the hotel.

“Marquis Hotel, Valerie speaking. How may I help you?”

“Yes, I would like to speak with security please.”

“Certainly. And who may I ask is calling?”

“Daniel Strauss.”

“Oh, Mr. Strauss! I thought I recognized your voice. Let me put you through to security now. Please hold.” (sleepy elevator music)

“Good morning, Mr. Strauss! Are you home already?”

“No, of course not. I’m calling from the train station.”

“Is everything OK, sir...?”

“Yes, everything is fine.”

“Good! What can I do for you?”

“Well, I was just wondering. Did you search the room where I was staying after I left?”

“Yes, I did. In fact, I just finished up a short time ago.”

“Really? Did you happen to find anything unusual?”

“Well, Mr. Strauss, as a matter of fact I did. Underneath the bed I discovered what appears to be some kind of odd-looking snakeskin.” He paused for a moment then said, “As a procedure, we also reviewed the surveillance footage for the 7th floor and the only other person coming and going in and out of room 707 yesterday was the housekeeper.”

Exasperated, I grabbed my suitcase and boarded the waiting train, anxious to get home. As it pulled away I glanced out the window and there she was, my colorful chameleon, just standing on the platform waving and smiling up at me with that malevolent grin of hers. There was nothing I could do. I watched her gradually fade into the background as the train accelerated and sped off down the tracks.

THE END

SUMMER 2017

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[Return to Contents](#)

RUMOURS OF WAR by Gavin Chappell

Gerald turned to Norman, who showed signs of rushing outside into the night after Percy.

‘You stay where you are!’ he said.

‘But where’s Percy gone?’ Norman demanded.

Gerald shook his head. ‘First we lost Brian... Now Percy’s gone.’ He rounded on Tito the taverner, who cringed back abjectly. ‘You! Baby killer! Where’ve they gone?’

Tito shook his head in dismay and uncertainty. ‘I don’t know!’ he said. ‘I suppose... the servitors of Zorn took Brian... But Percy ran off into the trees.’

‘I saw that!’ Gerald exploded. ‘After he’d told us no one should leave here, as well.’ He sighed. ‘We’d better follow. But together. No way are we getting more split up.’

He’d seen plenty of horror movies; well, two at least when he was at his big brother Andy’s. And he knew that anyone in this situation getting split up from the main group was going to end up horribly dead. ‘We can’t stay in here, anyway,’ he added.

‘I think I should stay,’ Tito said nervously.

‘Why?’ asked Gerald. ‘Afraid of your past catching up with you? You deserve everything those demons do to you, baby killer. Brian and Percy don’t.’

‘You said you’d protect me!’ Tito wailed.

Norman nodded. ‘We did say we’d help,’ he reminded Gerald.

‘This isn’t helping Brian or Percy!’ Gerald snarled. ‘Come on!’

He led them out into the darkness.

They paused at the edge of the yard. The charred stench of the burnt outbuilding was rank in the air. Beyond, all was darkness and gloom. Across the meadow loomed the trees. Gerald looked back.

The light of the glowing gems in the tavern made the building shine out like a beacon in the midst of the darkness. Even in the gloom, Gerald could see the holes in the thatch roof where something had been trampling up and down. The thing Brian had gone to fight. That brave, stupid, pillock. Probably dead by now.

‘So where’ve they gone?’ Norman asked. ‘You know, it would take less time to find them if we split up...’ He broke off as Gerald lifted a warning finger.

‘We are not splitting up,’ he snapped. ‘We stay together!’

He whirled round at a crashing sound from the trees behind the tavern and he led his companions at a run round the back. A figure blundered out into the moonlight. Gerald drew his sword then halted, bewildered. It was Brian, still clutching his bastard sword.

‘Get back...!’ Brian cried. ‘Get back inside! It’s coming! It’s coming!’

He fell forward and lay still as death in the middle of the moonlit vegetable patch.

Gerald and Norman exchanged perturbed glances. ‘Either Brian’s just had a very bad acting class,’ said Gerald thoughtfully, ‘or some real shit’s going down.’

‘Come on,’ said Norman, and they hurried across the vegetable patch to the spot where Brian lay. Gerald checked his friend’s breathing.

‘Well, he’s still alive,’ he said, ‘though he’d have died on stage... You take his legs.’

Together they half-carried half-dragged him back round the tavern and into the yard. Gerald looked around, frowning.

‘For fuck’s sake!’ he exclaimed. ‘Now Tito’s gone!’

‘This is just getting silly,’ Norman muttered. ‘Let’s get Brian inside. Some free beer will bring him round.’

Brian lifted his head. ‘Free beer?’

They sat at the bar, Brian guzzling beer like it was pop. Gerald gave him a moment to recover, then asked:

‘What happened to you out there? Did you see the demons? You just ran out with your sword and...’

‘And then everything went quiet,’ Norman said.

‘I ran outside into the night, sword held high,’ Brian said, and swigged at his ale. ‘I stood in the yard, and saw the thing that trampled upon the roof. As I watched, it leapt down into the darkness on the far side. It was the thing we saw before! I raced round the tavern building to see it streaking across the vegetable patch. So I followed it.’

‘Didn’t you think to turn back?’ asked Gerald. ‘Didn’t it occur to you that chasing a demon, on your own, into the depths of a forest you didn’t even know by daylight, on the night of the full moon, was a bit... rash?’

‘No,’ said Brian.

‘Pillock,’ said Gerald.

‘Come on, Gerald,’ said Norman. ‘Let’s hear what Brian has to say.’

‘I could see the thing through the trees at first,’ Brian said. ‘Then it vanished.’

‘What, really vanished?’ Norman asked. ‘Into thin air?’

Brian shrugged. ‘It’s dark in there, and there’s lots of trees. Maybe it just went behind one. But it... scared me.’

‘Scared? You?’ said Gerald, surprised by the admission. ‘I didn’t think you did that.’

‘Then I got lost in the trees. And it reappeared. I saw it ahead of me once, then two times, once on either side. First, I tried to get to it, but there was always something between us. Then I started thinking it was leading me into the trees to kill me. I realized I was lost. So I ran and ran. I thought I was lost for good. I kept seeing the thing through the trees. It was following me. Then... Then I burst out of the trees, saw you and... and I knew no more.’

‘You fainted, you wuss ...’ Gerald began, but Norman interrupted him.

‘Look!’ he cried, pointing at the tavern door. Gerald spun round.

The thing was there in the yard, the great tall black thing with its goat-skull head. The emissary of the demon Zorn. It seemed to be gazing at them.

‘Run!’ wailed Brian. ‘Is there a way out the back?’

Gerald ran. Straight towards the thing. When the emissary of Zorn saw him running towards him, it bolted and ran across the yard towards the trees. Gerald veered off to intercept it. It raced past him. He flung himself at where its legs should be, in a rugby tackle that would have warmed the cockles of his despairing PE teacher’s heart.

Immediately the entire thing collapsed. Through the stinking folds of a black cloak Gerald felt threshing legs and something firm and hard, like wood. The emissary of Zorn hit the ground with a thump and a very human groan, and the goat skull bounced off into a patch of nettles.

The cloak began to thrash again, as something tried to escape. Gerald tried to grab it, but a swift kick knocked him back. Then Brian was there, sword lifted high. Norman stepped past, and ripped off the cloak.

Gerald rose, rubbing his bruised face. A tall, thin man had been revealed. Gerald recognised him by the long white moustaches that seemed to glow in the moonlight.

‘Harek!’ Norman gasped.

‘So it was the janitor all along,’ Gerald muttered.

Brian laughed, and lowered his sword. He prodded it at Harek, who glowered up at them. ‘Go on! Go on! Say “Curses, foiled again!”’

‘You’d have got away with it if it wasn’t for us pesky kids.’ Gerald joined in the mockery. Harek looked bewildered and Gerald realised he’d never seen Scooby Doo.

‘But what were you doing lurking about dressed as a demon?’ Gerald added, gingerishly lifting the ox-skull out of the nettles. ‘You weren’t the sorcerer, were you? Surely you couldn’t have been.’

‘It was you!’

Gerald looked up to see Tito appear from the darkness.

‘I went looking for my doom,’ he said. ‘I thought it unfair to drag these people with me. I wanted it all to end. Now I see it was you, Harek. Why? Why?’

‘I think I can answer that.’

Gerald looked round. Percy was approaching from the meadow, forcing before him a bound, gagged figure wearing robes and a pointed hat.

‘I think this is all getting a bit too melodramatic,’ Gerald said wearily. ‘Anyone else hiding in the wings? No? Good. Okay, Percy. Answer it.’

‘Say hello to the Conjurer Kalitkin,’ Percy said, indicating the bound sorcerer. ‘This sod explained it all to me after a bit of encouragement.’

‘Where did you go?’ Gerald demanded.

There was a sudden blur of movement as Harek leapt up and tried to run. Tito pounced on him and bore him to the ground. He seemed braver than he had done before, now the enemy had been reduced to human-size. ‘You’re going nowhere,’ he growled.

‘Let me go,’ Harek mumbled. ‘Let me go!’

Tito punched him and he simmered down.

‘Percy?’ Gerald said, as if nothing had happened.

‘I saw this twat lurking about outside, so I went after him,’ Percy explained.

‘Good on ya,’ said Brian.

‘He picked up his skirts and ran. It was quite a chase, but I ran him down in the end. I threatened him with my sword and he soon blabbed. You won’t believe this.’

‘Won’t believe what? Are they both in league with this demon?’

‘There’s no demon,’ said Percy. ‘It’s all a con, a racket. The Conjurer Kalitkin is a failed sorcerer, can’t cast a single spell. But he cooked up this plot with Harek, who wanted to buy himself a farm and give up working for Tito. They just wanted a good supply of babies.’

Everyone was silent. Gerald stared from Harek to the gagged Kalitkin and back again.

‘Why?’ he asked in confusion. He hated babies. His big sister had had one last Christmas. Noisy, greedy little bastard, always crapping in its nappies. He couldn’t see the appeal. Why had this couple of weirdoes wanted them?

Kalitkin struggled wildly. Percy pulled off his gag. ‘You want to explain, conjurer?’ he asked.

‘What I wanted to say,’ said the conjurer in a high-pitched voice, ‘is what I came here to tell Harek. Harek!’ He addressed the pinioned old man. ‘The market has gone. Our customers don’t want our trade.’

‘What?’ exclaimed Harek in horror. ‘Has it all been pointless?’ He looked guiltily up at Tito, who snarled.

‘Who are your customers?’ Gerald demanded.

‘Merchants in the Mountain Duchies,’ explained Kalitkin. ‘They trade with the ogre kingdom.’

‘The ogre kingdom?’ Tito said in horror. ‘But the ogres eat... eat people...’

‘They prefer babies,’ said Kalitkin with an apologetic look. He nodded towards the tavern, where light from the glowing gems still spilled out into the gloom. ‘You light your hostelry with carbuncles? Glow-gems?’

Tito nodded, puzzled. ‘What’s that got to do with it?’

‘My associates trade with the ogres, who mine the carbuncles in their own kingdom,’ explained Kalitkin. ‘The ogres import many things from human lands, but what they prize most are human babies. It has made my associates rich.’

‘But now they don’t want your trade?’ Gerald demanded. ‘Why?’

‘There is war between Duke Dalimer and the ogres,’ Kalitkin explained. ‘That was why I came here, to tell Harek that the game was up.’

Tito rose and approached Kalitkin, his face a grim mask. ‘You put me through horror—for what? I’ll kill you!’

He seized the bound sorcerer by the throat and began to throttle him.

Gerald looked around at his friends. Brian watched with excitement, Percy with contempt, Norman with dismay. Gerald reached over and dragged Tito back, with the help of Norman, then Percy.

‘Enough of that,’ he told the struggling taverner. ‘These scum should face justice.’

Tito looked up angrily. ‘I’ll give them justice!’ he frothed.

‘No,’ said Gerald. ‘I tell you what you’ll do. You’ll take them back to Mayor Gall in Wishbone Village. Let him be the judge. And let him know what’s been happening. He needs to know. There may be more of these ... con-artists still around.’

‘What are you going to do?’ Tito asked sullenly.

‘We’re going to war,’ said Gerald.

Kalitkin and Harek were bound and imprisoned in Tito’s cellar, and everyone else went to sleep in Tito’s finest room. They slept through the morning and stirred sometime in the afternoon. Tito gave them the best food he had as well as rucksacks and other equipment. With their aid he marched Kalitkin and Harek, their hands still bound, to the ox-cart. Then the taverner set out with the two criminals in the back, back down the king’s highway to Wishbone Village.

‘Do you think he’ll do what you told him?’ Percy asked Gerald.

Gerald nodded. ‘I think so,’ he said. ‘It’s important that everyone knows what’s happening. We couldn’t just let him throttle them.’

Percy looked wonderingly at Gerald. ‘Since when did you care about that kind of thing?’

Gerald didn’t seem sure. ‘Since I met these bastards,’ he said at last. ‘And I want to meet the ogres who are behind it all. The baby-eating bastards. If there’s war with them, I want to be in the frontline.’

‘What about finding the sorceress Photogeneia?’ Percy asked.

Gerald looked bleakly at him. ‘This is different,’ he said. ‘That was just an excuse for wandering, something to do. If we find her and she sends us back to Earth, what then? Back to school? Fuck that. Here we can do something worth doing. We can fight the ogres. And that’s what we’re going to do.’

‘I agree,’ said Norman. ‘I don’t really like fighting. It scares me, and it’s dangerous. But we’ve got to make these ogres pay.’

‘Yeah!’ said Brian excitedly, posing with his bastard sword. ‘We’ll kill the fuckers!’

‘More likely they’ll kill us,’ Percy pointed out. ‘Okay, I don’t especially want to go back to school. This place is miles better. But we ought to go home in the end. As for fighting ogres...’

‘Three to one, so you’ve got to do it,’ said Brian.

‘Percy!’ Norman said. ‘We can’t let the ogres do this! They’re eating babies.’

‘I know,’ said Percy. ‘But I don’t reckon it’s our business. We’ll be risking our lives for people we don’t even know.’

Gerald shrugged. ‘I know what you’re saying, Percy,’ he said. ‘Normally I’d agree with you. But what’s going on here... it’s sick. We ought to do our best to stop them.’

Percy sighed, and flung his arms out. ‘Well, I’m not going to wander this world on my own,’ he said. ‘If you lot are determined to get involved in a war, I suppose I’ll have to come with you. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

He grabbed his sword and a rucksack full of provisions. At least they’d travel in some style, foodwise. ‘Come on,’ he said, ‘if we’re going.’

‘Where are we going, though?’ Norman asked as Percy led them down to the king’s highway. The others were weighed down with their own bags and their weapons.

‘This road leads to the Mountain Duchies,’ Percy said. ‘That’s where this war is going on. I reckon we follow it.’

‘Sounds like a plan,’ Gerald admitted. ‘Glad you’re with us, Percy.’

Percy looked at him morosely.

‘I’m not,’ he muttered.

They began to walk up the king’s highway.

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[Return to Contents](#)

THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO by Gregory KH Bryant

Episode Nineteen

Jeffrey searched the walls that separated him from Emily for any possible emergency hatches. There was nothing. Emily, on her side of the wall, did the same. Her efforts were just as futile.

Overhead, through the cracked ceiling of the dome, the battle for Callisto raged on. Fighter ships flew low, scant feet above Callisto Base 1. Countless barrages of laser cannon filled the Callistoan sky with endless, deadly streaks of ruby, scarlet, ultramarine. Plasma cannons of various kinds enveloped ships flying at five thousand miles an hour, cloaking them with viridian mists that caused them to disintegrate, flashing subatomic sparks that rained down upon the frozen purple plains.

Beyond the horizon, where Jupiter hung, stately and slowly rotating, uncountable flashes of light bit into the blackness, all of them indicating where the many battles among the Jovian moons were raging on.

The street shook beneath Jeffrey's feet. Another fighter had crashed into Callisto, only scant feet from the dome where he stood. Wreckage, sparking and flashing flames that were quickly extinguished in the thin atmosphere, rained down upon the already cracked dome.

The transparent steel of the dome buckled outward, ballooning shockingly toward the sky. Huge cracks shot across the dome.

Emily saw all that through a window in the emergency wall that separated them. She pounded on the glass with both her tiny fists.

"Jeffrey!" she screamed. Tears were running down her face. It was her fault, she knew. Jeffrey wanted to evacuate to the cellars, as everyone else had done. She was the one who dragged Jeffrey away to search for their parents. Emily hated herself at that moment.

Jeffrey looked back at her through the glass. He understood what was going through Emily's mind. He shook his head and smiled at her, trying in this mute way to tell her that no, she wasn't to blame. He was, after all, her older brother, and he made up his own mind about things, for himself.

"It's okay, Emily," he managed to get said through the intercom, and the painful lump that had gathered in his throat.

He turned away and looked at the wreckage of the dome. Only seconds away now, from destruction. He searched with his eyes for any possible escape. Nothing.

"Little girl!" came the surprised shout from across the plaza where Emily stood. "You shouldn't be here! It's not safe!"

Emily turned toward the direction from which the shout came, and saw three figures in heavy orange suits with helmets that covered their heads entirely. Emergency workers. The squad of

three that Colonel Bridgemont had ordered out moments before to recon the cracked dome, and, if possible, to jury-rig a quick repair.

“It’s my brother!” Emily squealed. Emily was a classically trained singer. Her squeals rang throughout the pod.

“He’s on the other side!” she said, pounding on the wall. “He can’t get out!”

The squad of workers hurried forward. Overhead, they could plainly see the damaged dome surging upward into the sky, as the atmospheric pressure inside the dome was several orders of magnitude stronger than the pressure outside.

“Damn, Harvey!” one emergency worker said to another. “It’s gonna blow!”

“Get him out! Get him out! Get him out!” cried a frantic Emily.

The squad leader looked through the windows of the security wall. He didn’t like what he saw.

“Get her outta here,” he ordered. “And you guys, too. Get out. I’ll see what I can do here.”

His squad mates, being well trained, wasted no time with futile objections. One of them picked Emily up in his beefy arms, and carried her off. The second followed.

Emily, for her part, offered no resistance. She understood that Jeffrey’s best chance to live was entirely in the hands of the squad commander. She would do what he said.

And carried in the arms of this stranger, Emily stared over his shoulder, tears still cascading down her face, for any last glimpse she might catch of her brother through the windows of the emergency hatch.

The squad commander wasted no time speaking. He stepped up to the emergency hatch and tapped in an override code with swift fingers. A light above the flashed red and yellow.

The door began to slide to the left, into the wall.

Jeffrey leaned into the door, ready to step through it.

The dome above exploded into the Callistoan sky.

When finally he attended to the task, it was but the matter of a moment for Turhan Mot to bring his ship, the “Grand Marquis” alongside the “Bellerophon”.

Turhan Mot’s crew had been well trained in all the plans that Turhan Mot had laid out for this battle. They were all of them, of those Turhan Mot trusted most, from deck hand to fighter pilot to Mokem Bet himself, Turhan Mot’s second in command, well briefed on every detail of Turhan Mot’s grand plan.

Indeed, as far as he knew it, Turhan Mot's plans were unfolding almost precisely as he had anticipated. Were it not for the unexpected nuisance of Carter Ward, Turhan Mot would have already joined with the "Reliant" in battle against the "Bellerophon".

Though he knew that the O8-111A and the "Charon" had both landed in his flight deck, Turhan Mot had not yet been fully apprised of the devastation wrought by Dimara. He did not know it, and wouldn't know it yet for several crucial minutes, that he had no flight deck, and the only fighter ships left to him were those that were already in battle.

The "Grand Marquis" was already traveling across the Callistoan sky at speeds equal to those of the "Bellerophon". It was only a matter of modifying the course of the "Grand Marquis" to catch up with the "Bellerophon."

Which Tu Hit, the ship's pilot easily accomplished.

He brought the "Grand Marquis" into a course parallel to that of the "Bellerophon", which still flew low, close to the surface of Callisto. The "Grand Marquis" came at last to maintain a constant position five miles distant and three hundred feet above the "Bellerophon".

Seeing that, Yamir brought his ship, the "Reliant" into play, closing in on the port side of the "Bellerophon", also at a distance of five miles. and three hundred feet above, to ensure to them both that they would neither of them hit each other while aiming their guns at the "Bellerophon".

Once in position, and as they had previously planned it, they both hit the "Bellerophon" with simultaneous barrages from their laser cannons

"We must first wear down their shields," Turhan Mot had explained to Yamir and Horst Dal as they laid out their schemes at Astra Palace, buried deep in asteroid 53-102-AT.

"And that will take time, for their shields are strong."

Yamir nodded his easy agreement. His smile was bland. He knew all this already.

The "Bellerophon", as a transport ship, was subject to interplanetary law, requiring all interplanetary craft be registered, with all pertinent data, at every planet, moon or asteroid it shipped to. That 'pertinent data' included such details as length, width, height, tonnage, date of manufacture, and so on.

With an easy search of public records, Yamir knew as much about the "Bellerophon" as did Turhan Mot.

The first barrage would be laser, they had agreed, to heat the surfaces of the "Bellerophon". And they did. Sudden shafts of light shot out over the brown and purple ice deserts of Callisto, dancing upon the outer surfaces of the "Bellerophon".

Fighter ships spun in tight circles around the ship, sometimes leaping outward in vast loops of several hundred miles. They fired constant short bursts of laser and plasma cannons. Lilac and viridian mists flitted across the frozen plains.

Then Turhan Mot and Yamir gave to order to fire their pulse cannons. Heavy pulses from barrages hit the “Bellerophon” simultaneously. With the atoms of the external surfaces of the “Bellerophon” already agitated by the laser barrage, the pulses caused the hull to begin to warp—tiny rents, small in number, and all of them microscopic. No naked eye examination of these tiny bends would discover them.

But then came a second barrage from the pulse cannons. The tiny rents grew, ever so slightly.

The “Bellerophon” fired back, of course. Multiple well-aimed rounds from its own pulse cannons, gave the crew on the “Reliant” a very unpleasant thirty seconds, as the pulses it blasted through them triggered huge convulsions in most of them, convincing them all that they were dying.

But, though they were shaken by the pulse, they were not cowed. As they struggled back to their feet, they prepared another barrage from their own pulse cannons.

The battle raged on.

Bridgemont was busy. The transparent domes protecting the colony were being hit constantly with a ceaseless fall of shrapnel. Where but minutes before only one dome was reported damaged, now six domes were cracked.

And, even as the battle raged over Callisto Base 1, Colonel Bridgemont was receiving reports that three large ships piloted by the Scroungers had landed outside the colony. The crews were already at the space port outside the city, working to open the airlocks of the landing bays. Once they had taken control of the airlocks, they’d be able to commandeer the train lines that led to the colony. After that, it was only a matter of minutes before they’d be able to easily overrun Callisto Base 1.

“How many people do we have there?” Bridgemont demanded.

“A skeleton crew of just twelve men and women, sir,” his adjutant informed him. “All who could pilot ships are up there,” he added, pointing to the battle raging over their heads.

“Do we have anyone else we can send?”

“All staff, sir, are at their posts.”

Bridgemont cast his eyes about, searching the crew there with him at the command post. He came to several decisions.

“Captain Waverly, take six volunteers and meet up with our people at our space port. We can give ‘em that much, at least.”

Waverly, a man in his late forties with short pepper-coloured hair and a temper to match looked over the crew staffing the command post.

“You, you, you and you,” he said, pointing to each person, as he spoke. “Come with me. And you two, as well.”

All four people he had selected, four men and two women, saluted, stood up and followed him out the door.

In moments he had led them to the skycabs that took them to the station where the trains from the space port offloaded passengers and cargo. Except for themselves, the station was nearly empty. There was but a crew of three people standing their posts.

Three small cars were set on three tracks. Each car could carry as many as nine people.

“Any of you guys know how to drive one of these things?” Waverly asked.

One of the three crew, the station master, raised his hand.

“Yeah, I can do it,” he said.

“All right, get us out to the space port,” Waverly said.

“Sure.”

The station master popped open the sliding door to the car, and climbed into the driver’s seat. Captain Waverly followed with his six crewmen.

The station master guided the car easily down the tracks, into the transparent tube that led to the space port, some miles away. The ground beneath the tracks rolled with the concussions of fighter ships pulse cannons.

High overhead, the field of mines laid by Colonel Westland shimmered like silvery points of light in the sky. Occasionally a Scrounger’s ship blundered into the mine field, and the ship, suddenly without control as the crew within was instantly killed by the pulses of the mines, veered wildly through the sky, until it finally crashed into the frozen deserts of Callisto.

Waverly and his crew could easily see the battle outside the tube, and when they came up on the space port some short minutes later, they saw that no fewer than six Scrounger transport ships had landed outside the space port. Turning into a broad curve, Waverly saw the pirates working on the airlocks. Yes, they would soon make their way into the base.

As the car slowed to a stop within the space port, Waverly came to an instant decision.

“Blow those tracks,” he ordered, pointing to the three sets of tracks that ran parallel to each other, all leading back to Callisto Base 1, several miles away.

“Sir?”

“If those bastards do get through us,” Waverly said, “We’re gonna make ‘em walk every step of the way.”

“Yes, sir.”

Waverly's crew set themselves to blowing the tracks, and in a matter of minutes, it was done.

““All right, boys and girls,” he said, that job finished. “Let's go give 'em, back up at the airlocks.”

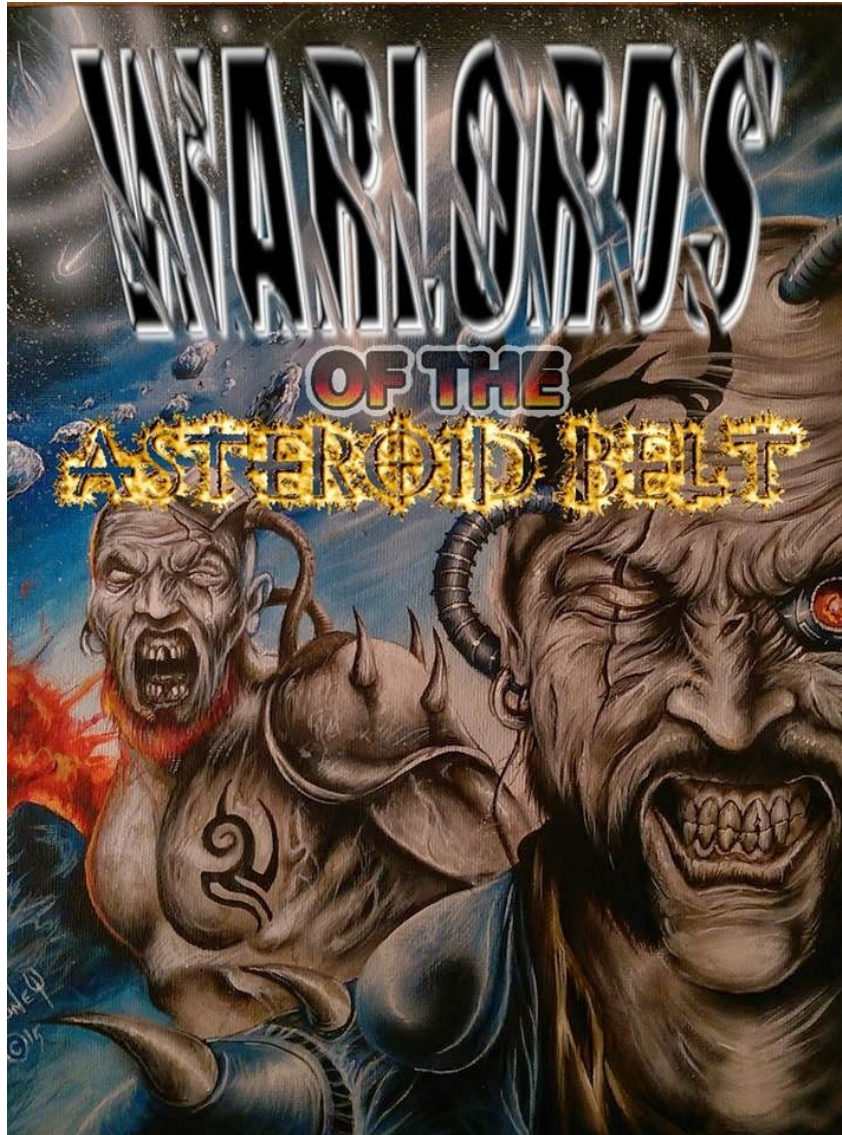
Which was only just in time. They ran across the tarmac to the locks that opened the bay doors, allowing transport ships to enter with their cargo. Just as they came up on the twelve men and women of Callisto Base 1 Security, the airlock blew open, huge swaths of steam billowing throughout the landing bay.

Shouts and loud curses rang out through the vast landing bay, the triumphant cheers of the Scroungers charging through the opened bay.

The Scroungers had done it. They had broken into Callisto Base 1.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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



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[Return to Contents](#)

TALES OF THE DEAD by Johann August Apel

The Spectre Barber—A Tale of the Sixteenth Century

*“Sir Ryence of North-Gales greeteth well thee,
And bids thee thy beard anon to him send,
Or else from thy jaws he will it off rend.”*

Percy’s Reliques of Anc. Eng. Poetry.

There formerly lived at Bremen a wealthy merchant named Melchior, who, it was remarked, invariably stroked his chin with complacency, whenever the subject of the sermon was the rich man in the Gospel; who, by the bye, in comparison with him, was only a petty retail dealer. This said Melchior possessed such great riches, that he had caused the floor of his dining-room to be paved with crown-pieces. This ridiculous luxury gave great offence to Melchior’s fellow-citizens and relations. They attributed it to vanity and ostentation, but did not guess its true motive: however, it perfectly answered the end Melchior designed by it; for, by their constantly expressing their disapprobation of this ostentatious species of vanity, they spread abroad the report of their neighbour’s immense riches, and thereby augmented his credit in a most astonishing manner.

Melchior died suddenly while at a corporation dinner, and consequently had not time to make a disposition of his property by will; so that his only son Francis, who was just of age, came into possession of the whole. This young man was particularly favoured by fortune, both with respect to his personal advantages and his goodness of heart; but this immense inheritance caused his ruin. He had no sooner got into the possession of so considerable a fortune, than he squandered it, as if it had been a burthen to him; ran into every possible extravagance, and neglected his concerns. Two or three years passed over without his perceiving, that, owing to his dissipations, his funds were considerably diminished; but at length his coffers were emptied: and one day when Francis had drawn a draft to a very considerable amount on his banker, who had no funds to meet it, it was returned to him protested. This disappointment greatly vexed our prodigal, but only as it caused a temporary check to his wishes; for he did not even then give himself the trouble to inquire into the reason of it. After swearing and blustering for some time, he gave his steward a positive but laconic order to get money.

All the brokers, bankers, money-changers, and usurers, were put in requisition, and the empty coffers were soon filled; for the dining-room floor was in the eyes of the lenders a sufficient security.

This palliative had its effect for a time: but all at once a report was spread abroad in the city that the celebrated silver floor had been taken up; the consequence of which was, that the lenders insisted on examining into and proving the fact, and then became urgent for payment: but as Francis had not the means to meet their demands, they seized on all his goods and chattels; everything was sold by auction, and he had nothing left excepting a few jewels which had formed part of his heritage, and which might for a short time keep him from starving.

He now took up his abode in a small street in one of the most remote quarters of the city, where he lived on his straitened means. He, however, accommodated himself to his situation: but the only resource he found against the ennui which overpowered him, was to play on the

lute; and when fatigued by this exercise, he used to stand at his window and make observations on the weather; and his intelligent mind was not long in discovering an object which soon entirely engrossed his thoughts.

Opposite his window there lived a respectable woman, who was at her spinning-wheel from morning till night, and by her industry earned a subsistence for herself and her daughter. Meta was a young girl of great beauty and attraction: she had known happier times; for her father had been the proprietor of a vessel freighted by himself, in which he annually made trading voyages to Antwerp: but he, as well as his ship and all its cargo, was lost in a violent storm. His widow supported this double loss with resignation and firmness, and resolved to support herself and her daughter by her own industry. She made over her house and furniture to the creditors of her husband, and took up her abode in the little bye street in which Francis lodged, where by her assiduity she acquired a subsistence without laying herself under an obligation to anyone. She brought up her daughter to spinning and other work, and lived with so much economy, that by her savings she was enabled to set up a little trade in linen.

Mother Bridget, (which was the appellation given to our widow,) did not, however, calculate on terminating her existence in this penurious situation; and the hope of better prospects sustained her courage. The beauty and excellent qualities of her daughter, whom she brought up with every possible care and attention, led her to think that some advantageous offer would one day present itself. Meta lived tranquilly and lonely with her mother, was never seen in any of the public walks, and indeed never went out but to mass once a day.

One day while Francis was making his meteorological observations at the window, he saw the beautiful Meta, who, under her mother's watchful eye, was returning from church. The heart of Francis was as yet quite free; for the boisterous pleasures of his past life did not leave him leisure for a true affection; but at this time, when all his senses were calm, the appearance of one of the most enchanting female forms he had ever seen, ravished him, and he henceforth thought solely of the adorable object which his eyes had thus discovered. He questioned his landlord respecting the two females who lived in the opposite house, and from him learned the particulars we have just related.

He now regretted his want of economy, since his present miserable state prevented him from making an offer to the charming Meta. He was, however, constantly at the window, in hopes of seeing her, and in that consisted his greatest delight. The mother very soon discovered the frequent appearance of her new neighbour at his window, and attributed it to its right cause. In consequence, she rigorously enjoined her daughter not to shew herself at the windows, which were now kept constantly shut.

Francis was not much versed in the arts of finesse, but love awakened all the energies of his soul. He soon discovered that if he appeared much at the window, his views would be suspected, and he resolved therefore studiously to refrain from coming near it. He determined, however, to continue his observation of what occurred in the opposite dwelling without being perceived. He accordingly purchased a large mirror, and fixed it in his chamber in such a position that it distinctly presented to his view what passed in the abode of his opposite neighbour. Francis not being seen at the window, the old lady relaxed in her rigour, and Meta's windows were once more opened. Love more than ever reigned triumphant in the bosom of Francis: but how was he to make known his attachment to its object? he could neither speak nor write to her. Love, however, soon suggested a mode of communication which succeeded. Our prodigal took his lute, and drew from it tones the best adapted to

express the subject of his passion; and by perseverance, in less than a month he made a wonderful progress. He soon had the gratification of seeing the fair hand of Meta open the little casement, when he began to tune the instrument. When she made her appearance, he testified his joy by an air lively and gay; but if she did not shew herself, the melancholy softness of his tones discovered the disappointment he experienced.

In the course of a short time he created a great interest in the bosom of his fair neighbour; and various modes which love suggested shortly convinced our prodigal that Meta shared a mutual attachment. She now endeavoured to justify him, when her mother with acrimony spoke of his prodigality and past misconduct, by attributing his ruin to the effect of bad example. But in so doing, she cautiously avoided exciting the suspicions of the old lady; and seemed less anxious to excuse him, than to take a part in the conversation which was going on.

Circumstances which our limits will not allow us to narrate rendered the situation of Francis more and more difficult to be supported: his funds had now nearly failed him; and an offer of marriage from a wealthy brewer, who was called in the neighbourhood the “King of Hops,” and which Meta, much to her mother’s disappointment, refused, excited still more the apprehensions of poor Francis, lest some more fortunate suitor might yet be received, and blast his hopes for ever.

When he received the information that this opulent lover had been rejected for his sake, with what bitterness did he lament his past follies!

“Generous girl!” said he, “you sacrifice yourself for a miserable creature, who has nothing but a heart fondly attached to you, and which is riven with despair that its possessor cannot offer you the happiness you so truly merit.”

The King of Hops soon found another female, who listened more kindly to his vows, and whom he wedded with great splendour.

Love, however, did not leave his work incomplete; for its influence created in the mind of Francis a desire of exerting his faculties and actively employing himself, in order, if possible, to emerge from the state of nothingness into which he was at present plunged: and it inspired him also with courage to prosecute his good intentions. Among various projects which he formed, the most rational appeared that of overlooking his father’s books, taking an account of the claimable debts, and from that source to get all he possibly could. The produce of this procedure would, he thought, furnish him with the means of beginning in some small way of business; and his imagination led him to extend this to the most remote corners of the earth. In order to equip himself for the prosecution of his plans, he sold all the remainder of his father’s effects, and with the money purchased a horse to commence his travels.

The idea of a separation from Meta was almost more than he could endure. “What will she think,” said he, “of this sudden disappearance, when she no longer meets me in her way to church? Will she not think me perfidious, and banish me from her heart?” Such ideas as these caused him infinite pain: and for a long while he could not devise any means of acquainting Meta with his plans; but at length the fertile genius of love furnished him with the following idea:—Francis went to the curate of the church which his mistress daily frequented, and requested him before the sermon and during mass to put up prayers for a happy issue to the

affairs of a young traveller; and these prayers were to be continued till the moment of his return, when they were to be changed into those of thanks.

Everything being arranged for his departure, he mounted his steed, and passed close under Meta's window. He saluted her with a very significant air, and with much less caution than heretofore. The young girl blushed deeply; and mother Bridget took this opportunity of loudly expressing her dislike to this bold adventurer, whose impertinence and foppiness induced him to form designs on her daughter.

From this period the eyes of Meta in vain searched for Francis. She constantly heard the prayer which was put up for him; but was so entirely absorbed by grief at no longer perceiving the object of her affection, that she paid no attention to the words of the priest. In no way could she account for his disappearing. Some months afterwards, her grief being somewhat ameliorated, and her mind more tranquillized, when she was one day thinking of the last time she had seen Francis, the prayer arrested her attention; she reflected for an instant, and quickly divined for whom it was said; she naturally joined in it with great fervour, and strongly recommended the young traveller to the protection of her guardian angel.

Meanwhile Francis continued his journey, and had travelled the whole of a very sultry day over one of the desert cantons of Westphalia without meeting with a single house. As night approached, a violent storm came on: the rain fell in torrents; and poor Francis was soaked to the very skin. In this miserable situation he anxiously looked around, and fortunately discovered in the distance a light, towards which he directed his horse's steps; but as he drew near, he beheld a miserable cottage, which did not promise him much succour, for it more resembled a stable than the habitation of a human being. The unfeeling wretch who inhabited it refused him fire or water as if he had been a banished man—he was just about to extend himself on the straw in the midst of the cattle, and his indolence prevented his lighting a fire for the stranger. Francis vainly endeavoured to move the peasant to pity: the latter was inexorable, and blew out his candle with the greatest nonchalance possible, without bestowing a thought on Francis. However, as the traveller hindered him from sleeping, by his incessant lamentations and prayers, he was anxious to get rid of him.

"Friend," said he to him, "if you wish to be accommodated, I promise you it will not be here; but ride through the little wood to your left-hand, and you will find the castle belonging to the chevalier Eberhard Bronkhorst, who is very hospitable to travellers; but he has a singular mania, which is, to flagellate all whom he entertains: therefore decide accordingly."

Francis, after considering for some minutes what he had best do, resolved on hazarding the adventure. "In good faith," said he, "there is no great difference between having one's back broken by the miserable accommodation of a peasant, or by the chevalier Bronkhorst: friction disperses fever; possibly its effects may prove beneficial to me, if I am compelled to keep on my wet garments."

Accordingly he put spurs to his horse, and very shortly found himself before a gothic castle, at the iron gate of which he loudly knocked: and was answered from within by "Who's there?" But ere he was allowed time to reply, the gate was opened. However, in the first court he was compelled to wait with patience, till they could learn whether it was the lord of the castle's pleasure to flagellate a traveller, or send him out to pass the night under the canopy of heaven.

This lord of the castle had from his earliest infancy served in the Imperial army, under command of George of Frunsberg, and had himself led a company of infantry against the Venetians. At length, however, fatigued with warfare, he had retired to his own territory, where, in order to expiate the crimes he had committed during the several campaigns he had been in, he did all the good and charitable acts in his power. But his manner still preserved all the roughness of his former profession. The newly arrived guest, although disposed to submit to the usages of the house for the sake of the good fare, could not help feeling a certain trembling of fear as he heard the bolts grating, ere the doors were opened to him; and the very doors by their groaning noise seemed to presage the catastrophe which awaited him. A cold perspiration came over him as he passed the last door; but finding that he received the utmost attention, his fears a little abated. The servants assisted him in getting off his horse, and unfastened his cloak-bag; some of them led his horse to the stable, while others preceding him with flambeaux conducted Francis to their master, who awaited his arrival in a room magnificently lighted up.

Poor Francis was seized with an universal tremour when he beheld the martial air and athletic form of the lord of the castle, who came up to him and shook him by the hand with so much force that he could scarcely refrain from crying out, and in a thundering voice enough to stun him, told him “he was welcome.” Francis shook like an aspen-leaf in every part of his body.

“What ails you, my young comrade?” cried the chevalier Bronkhorst, in his voice of thunder: “What makes you thus tremble, and renders you as pale as if death had actually seized you by the throat?”

Francis recovered himself; and knowing that his shoulders would pay the reckoning, his fears gave place to a species of audacity.

“My lord,” answered he with confidence, “you see that I am so soaked with rain that one might suppose I had swam through the Wezer; order me therefore some dry clothes instead of those I have on, and let us then drink a cup of hot wine, that I may, if possible, prevent the fever which otherwise may probably seize me. It will comfort my heart.”

“Admirable!” replied the chevalier; “ask for whatever you want, and consider yourself here as at home.”

Accordingly Francis gave his orders like a baron of high degree: he sent away the wet clothes, made choice of others, and, in fine, made himself quite at his ease. The chevalier, so far from expressing any dissatisfaction at his free and easy manners, commanded his people to execute whatever he ordered with promptitude, and condemned some of them as blockheads who did not appear to know how to wait on a stranger. As soon as the table was spread, the chevalier seated himself at it with his guest: they drank a cup of hot wine together.

“Do you wish for any thing to eat?” demanded the lord of Francis.

The latter desired he would order up what his house afforded, that he might see whether his kitchen was good.

No sooner had he said this, than the steward made his appearance, and soon furnished up a most delicious repast. Francis did not wait for his being requested to partake of it: but after

having made a hearty meal, he said to the lord of the castle, "Your kitchen is by no means despicable; if your cellar is correspondent, I cannot but say you treat your guests nobly."

The chevalier made a sign to his butler, who brought up some inferior wine, and filled a large glass of it to his master, who drank to his guest. Francis instantly returned the compliment.

"Well, young man, what say you to my wine?" asked the chevalier.

"Faith," replied Francis, "I say it is bad, if it is the best you have in your cellar; but if you have none worse, I do not condemn it."

"You are a connoisseur;" answered the chevalier. "Butler, bring us a flask of older wine."

His orders being instantly attended to, Francis tasted it. "This is indeed some good old wine, and we will stick to it if you please."

The servants brought in a great pitcher of it, and the chevalier, being in high good-humour, drank freely with his guest; and then launched out into a long history of his several feats of prowess in the war against the Venetians. He became so overheated by the recital, that in his enthusiasm he overturned the bottles and glasses, and flourishing his knife as if it were a sword, passed it so near the nose and ears of Francis, that he dreaded he should lose them in the action.

Though the night wore away, the chevalier did not manifest any desire to sleep; for he was quite in his element, whenever he got on the topic of the Venetian war. Each succeeding glass added to the heat of his imagination as he proceeded in his narration, till at length Francis began to apprehend that it was the prologue to the tragedy in which he was to play the principal part; and feeling anxious to learn whether he was to pass the night in the castle, or to be turned out, he asked for a last glass of wine to enable him to sleep well. He feared that they would commence by filling him with wine, and that if he did not consent to continue drinking, a pretext would be laid hold of for driving him out of the castle with the usual chastisement.

However, contrary to his expectation, the lord of the castle broke the thread of his narration, and said to him: "Good friend, every thing in its place: to-morrow we will resume our discourse."

"Excuse me, sir knight," replied Francis; "to-morrow, before sun-rise, I shall be on my road. The distance from hence to Brabant is very considerable, and I cannot tarry here longer, therefore permit me to take leave of you now, that I may not disturb you in the morning."

"Just as you please about that: but you will not leave the castle before I am up; we will breakfast together, and I shall accompany you to the outer gate, and take leave of you according to my usual custom."

Francis needed no comment to render these words intelligible. Most willingly would he have dispensed with the chevalier's company to the gate; but the latter did not appear at all inclined to deviate from his usual custom. He ordered his servants to assist the stranger in undressing, and to take care of him till he was in bed.

Francis found his bed an excellent one; and ere he went to sleep, he owned that so handsome a reception was not dearly bought at the expense of a trifling beating. The most delightful dreams (in which Meta bore the sway) occupied him the whole night; and he would have gone on (thus dreaming) till mid-day, if the sonorous voice of the chevalier and the clanking of his spurs had not disturbed him.

It needed all Francis's efforts to quit this delightful bed, in which he was so comfortable, and where he knew himself to be in safety: he turned from side to side; but the chevalier's tremendous voice was like a death-stroke to him, and at length he resolved to get up. Several servants assisted him in dressing, and the chevalier waited for him at a small but well-served table; but Francis, knowing the moment of trial was at hand, had no great inclination to feast. The chevalier tried to persuade him to eat, telling him it was the best thing to keep out the fog and damp air of the morning.

"Sir knight," replied Francis, "my stomach is still loaded from your excellent supper of last evening; but my pockets are empty, and I should much like to fill them, in order to provide against future wants."

The chevalier evinced his pleasure at his frankness by filling his pockets with as much as they could contain. As soon as they brought him his horse, which he discovered had been well groomed and fed, he drank the last glass of wine to say Adieu, expecting that at that signal the chevalier would take him by the collar and make him pay his welcome. But, to his no small surprise, the chevalier contented himself with heartily shaking him by the hand as on his arrival: and as soon as the gate was opened, Francis rode off safe and sound.

In no way could our traveller account for his host permitting him thus to depart without paying the usual score. At length he began to imagine that the peasant had simply told him the story to frighten him; and feeling a curiosity to learn whether or not it had any foundation in fact, he rode back to the castle. The chevalier had not yet quitted the gate, and was conversing with his servants on the pace of Francis's horse, who appeared to trot very roughly: and seeing the traveller return, he supposed that he had forgotten something, and by his looks seemed to accuse his servants of negligence.

"What do you want, young man?" demanded he: "Why do you, who were so much pressed for time, return?"

"Allow me, most noble sir," replied Francis, "to ask you one question, for there are reports abroad which tend to vilify you: It is said, that, after having hospitably received and entertained strangers, you make them at their departure feel the weight of your arm. And although I gave credence to this rumour, I have omitted nothing which might have entitled me to this mark of your favour. But, strange to say, you have permitted me to depart in peace, without even the slightest mark of your strength. You see my surprise; therefore do pray inform me whether there is any foundation for the report, or whether I shall chastise the impudent story-teller who related the false tale to me."

"Young man," replied Bronkhorst, "you have heard nothing but the truth: but it needs some explanations.—I open my door hospitably to every stranger, and in Christian charity I give them a place at my table; but I am a man who hates form or disguise; I say all I think, and only wish in return that my guests openly and undisguisedly ask for all they want. There are unfortunately, however, a tribe of people who fatigue by their mean complaisance and

ceremonies without end; who wear me out by their dissimulation, and stun me by propositions devoid of sense, or who do not conduct themselves with decency during the repast. Gracious heavens! I lose all patience when they carry their fooleries to such excesses, and I exert my right as master of the castle, by taking hold of their collars, and giving them tolerably severe chastisement ere I turn them out of my gates.—But a man of your sort, my young friend, will ever be welcome under my roof; for you boldly and openly ask for what you require, and say what you think; and such are the persons I admire. If in your way back you pass through this canton, promise me you will pay me another visit. Good bye! Let me caution you never to place implicit confidence in any thing you hear; believe only that there may be a single grain of truth in the whole story: be always frank, and you will succeed through life. Heaven's blessings attend you."

Francis continued his journey towards Anvers most gaily, wishing, as he went, that he might every where meet with as good a reception as at the chevalier Bronkhorst's.

Nothing remarkable occurred during the rest of his journey: and he entered the city full of the most sanguine hopes and expectations. In every street his fancied riches stared him in the face. "It appears to me," said he, "that some of my father's debtors must have succeeded in business, and that they will only require my presence to repay their debts with honour."

After having rested from the fatigue of his journey, he made himself acquainted with every particular relative to the debtors, and learnt that the greater part had become rich, and were doing extremely well. This intelligence reanimated his hopes: he arranged his papers, and paid a visit to each of the persons who owed him any thing. But his success was by no means what he had expected: some of the debtors pretended that they had paid every thing; others, that they had never heard mention of Melchior of Bremen; and the rest produced accounts precisely contradictory to those he had, and which tended to prove they were creditors instead of debtors. In fine, ere three days had elapsed, Francis found himself in the debtors-prison, from whence he stood no chance of being released till he had paid the uttermost farthing of his father's debts.

How pitiable was this poor young man's condition! Even the horrors of the prison were augmented by the remembrance of Meta:—nay, to such a pitch of desperation was he carried, that he resolved to starve himself. Fortunately, however, at twenty-seven years of age such determinations are more easily formed than practised.

The intention of those who put him into confinement was not merely with a view of exacting payment of his pretended debts, but to avoid paying him his due: so, whether the prayers put up for poor Francis at Bremen were effectual, or that the pretended creditors were not disposed to maintain him during his life, I know not; but after a detention of three months they liberated Francis from prison, with a particular injunction to quit the territories of Anvers within four-and-twenty hours, and never to set his foot within that city again:—They gave him at the same time five florins to defray his expenses on the road. As one may well imagine, his horse and baggage had been sold to defray the costs incident to the proceedings.

With a heart overloaded with grief he quitted Anvers, in a very different frame of mind to what he experienced at entering it. Discouraged and irresolute, he mechanically followed the road which chance directed: he paid no attention to the various travellers, or indeed to any object on the road, till hunger or thirst caused him to lift his eyes to discover a steeple or some other token announcing the habitation of human beings. In this state of mind did he

continue journeying on for several days incessantly; nevertheless a secret instinct impelled him to take the road leading to his own country.

All on a sudden he roused as if from a profound sleep, and recollected the place in which he was: he stopped an instant to consider whether he should continue the road he was then in, or return; "For," said he, "what a shame to return to my native city a beggar!" How could he thus return to that city in which he formerly felt equal to the richest of its inhabitants? How could he as a beggar present himself before Meta, without causing her to blush for the choice she had made? He did not allow time for his imagination to complete this miserable picture, for he instantly turned back, as if already he had found himself before the gates of Bremen, followed by the shouts of the children. His mind was soon made up as to what he should do: he resolved to go to one of the ports of the Low-Countries, there to engage himself as sailor on board a Spanish vessel, to go to the newly discovered world; and not to return to his native country till he had amassed as much wealth as he had formerly so thoughtlessly squandered. In the whole of this project, Meta was only thought of at an immeasurable distance: but Francis contented himself with connecting her in idea with his future plans, and walked, or rather strode along, as if by hurrying his pace he should sooner gain possession of her.

Having thus attained the frontiers of the Low-Countries, he arrived at sun-set in a village situated near Rheinburg; but since entirely destroyed in the thirty years' war. A caravan of carriers from Liege filled the inn so entirely, that the landlord told Francis he could not give him a lodging; adding, that at the adjoining village he would find accommodations.—Possibly he was actuated to this refusal by Francis's appearance, who certainly in point of garb might well be mistaken for a vagabond.

The landlord took him for a spy to a band of thieves, sent probably to rob the carriers: so that poor Francis, spite of his extreme lassitude, was compelled with his wallet at his back to proceed on his road; and having at his departure muttered through his teeth some bitter maledictions against the cruel and unfeeling landlord, the latter appeared touched with compassion for the poor stranger, and from the door of the inn called after him: "Young man; a word with you! If you resolve on passing the night here, I will procure you a lodging in that castle you now see on the hill; there you will have rooms in abundance, provided you are not afraid of being alone, for it is uninhabited. See, here are the keys belonging to it."

Francis joyfully accepted the landlord's proposition, and thanked him for it as if it had been an act of great charity.

"It is to me a matter of little moment where I pass the night, provided I am at my ease, and have something to eat." But the landlord was an ill-tempered fellow; and wishing to revenge the invectives Francis had poured forth against him, he sent him to the castle in order that he might be tormented by the spirits which were said to frequent it.

This castle was situated on a steep rock, and was only separated from the village by the high-road and a little rivulet. Its delightful prospects caused it to be kept in good repair, and to be well furnished, as its owner made use of it as a hunting-seat: but no sooner did night come on than he quitted it, in order to avoid the apparitions and ghosts which haunted it; but during the day nothing of the sort was visible, and all was tranquil.

When it was quite dark, Francis with a lantern in his hand proceeded towards the castle. The landlord accompanied him, and carried a little basket of provisions, to which he had added a

bottle of wine (which he said would stand the test), as well as two candles and two wax-tapers for the night. Francis, not thinking he should require so many things, and being apprehensive he should have to pay for them, asked why they were all brought.

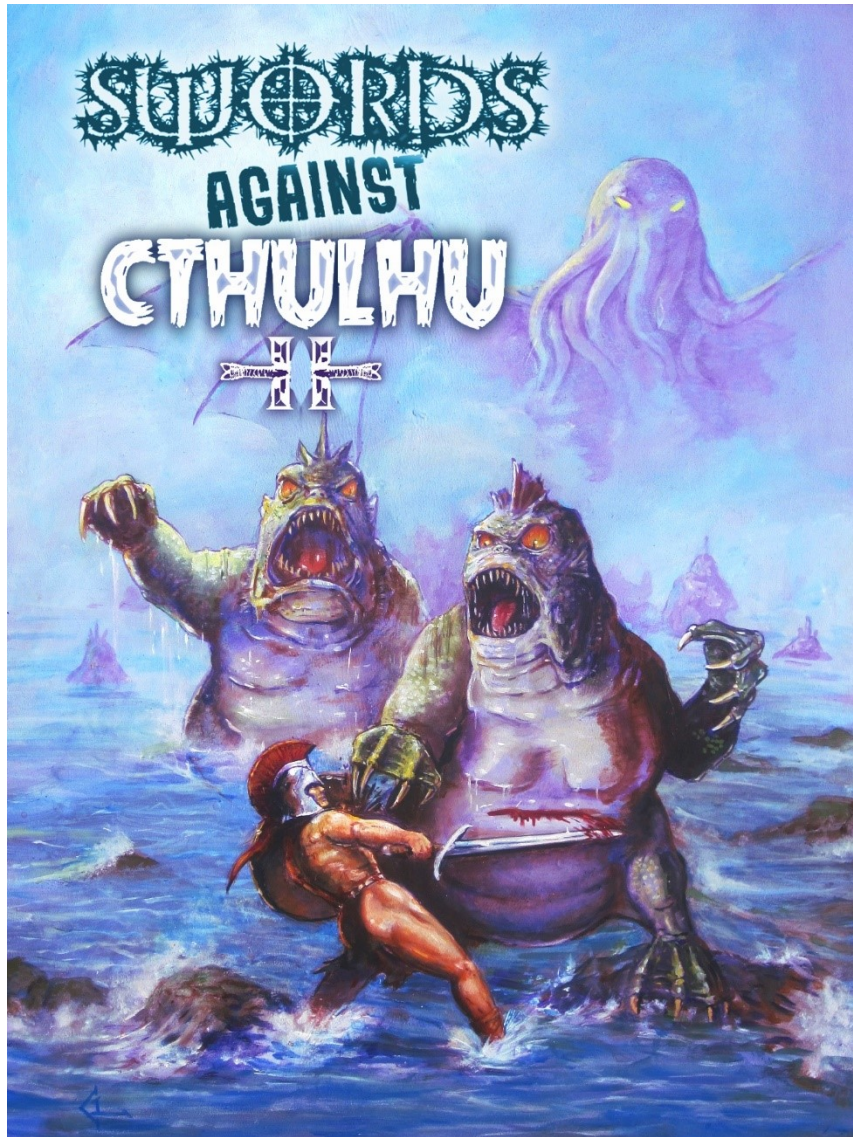
“The light from my lantern,” said he, “will suffice me till the time of my getting into bed; and ere I shall get out of it, the sun will have risen, for I am quite worn out with fatigue.”

“I will not endeavour to conceal from you,” replied the landlord, “that according to the current reports this castle is haunted by evil spirits: but do not let that frighten you; you see I live sufficiently near, that, in case any thing extraordinary should happen to you, I can hear you call, and shall be in readiness with my people to render you any assistance. At my house there is somebody stirring all night, and there is also some one constantly on the watch. I have lived on this spot for thirty years, and cannot say that I have ever seen any thing to alarm me: indeed, I believe that you may with safety attribute any noises you hear during the night in this castle, to cats and weazels, with which the granaries are overrun. I have only provided you with the means of keeping up a light in case of need, for, at best, night is but a gloomy season; and, in addition, these candles are consecrated, and their light will undoubtedly keep off any evil spirits, should there be such in the castle.”

The landlord spoke only the truth, when he said he had not seen any ghosts in the castle; for he never had the courage to set his foot within its doors after dark; and though he now spoke so courageously, the rogue would not have ventured on any account to enter. After having opened the door, he gave the basket into Francis’s hand, pointed out the way he was to turn, and wished him good night: while the latter, fully satisfied that the story of the ghosts must be fabulous, gaily entered. He recollected all that had been told him to the prejudice of the chevalier Bronkhorst, but unfortunately forgot what that brave Castellan had recommended to him at parting.

Conformably to the landlord’s instructions, he went up stairs and came to a door, which the key in his possession soon unlocked: it opened into a long dark gallery, where his very steps re-echoed; this gallery led to a large hall, from which issued a suite of apartments furnished in a costly manner: he surveyed them all; and made choice of one in which to pass the night, that appeared rather more lively than the rest. The windows looked to the high-road, and every thing that passed in front of the inn could be distinctly heard from them. He lighted two candles, spread the cloth, ate very heartily, and felt completely at his ease so long as he was thus employed; for while eating, no thought or apprehension of spirits molested him; but he no sooner arose from table, than he began to feel a sensation strongly resembling fear.

CONCLUDES NEXT WEEK



[Return to Contents](#)

THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND by Jules Verne

Part 3. The Secret of the Island

Chapter 5

So, then, all was explained by the submarine explosion of this torpedo. Cyrus Harding could not be mistaken, as, during the war of the Union, he had had occasion to try these terrible engines of destruction. It was under the action of this cylinder, charged with some explosive substance, nitro-glycerine, picrate, or some other material of the same nature, that the water of the channel had been raised like a dome, the bottom of the brig crushed in, and she had sunk instantly, the damage done to her hull being so considerable that it was impossible to refloat her. The "Speedy" had not been able to withstand a torpedo that would have destroyed an ironclad as easily as a fishing-boat!

Yes! all was explained, everything—except the presence of the torpedo in the waters of the channel!

"My friends, then," said Cyrus Harding, "we can no longer be in doubt as to the presence of a mysterious being, a castaway like us, perhaps, abandoned on our island, and I say this in order that Ayrton may be acquainted with all the strange events which have occurred during these two years. Who this beneficent stranger is, whose intervention has, so fortunately for us, been manifested on many occasions, I cannot imagine. What his object can be in acting thus, in concealing himself after rendering us so many services, I cannot understand: But his services are not the less real, and are of such a nature that only a man possessed of prodigious power, could render them. Ayrton is indebted to him as much as we are, for, if it was the stranger who saved me from the waves after the fall from the balloon, evidently it was he who wrote the document, who placed the bottle in the channel, and who has made known to us the situation of our companion. I will add that it was he who guided that chest, provided with everything we wanted, and stranded it on Flotsam Point; that it was he who lighted that fire on the heights of the island, which permitted you to land; that it was he who fired that bullet found in the body of the peccary; that it was he who plunged that torpedo into the channel, which destroyed the brig; in a word, that all those inexplicable events, for which we could not assign a reason, are due to this mysterious being. Therefore, whoever he may be, whether shipwrecked, or exiled on our island, we shall be ungrateful, if we think ourselves freed from gratitude towards him. We have contracted a debt, and I hope that we shall one day pay it."

"You are right in speaking thus, my dear Cyrus," replied Gideon Spilett. "Yes, there is an almost all-powerful being, hidden in some part of the island, and whose influence has been singularly useful to our colony. I will add that the unknown appears to possess means of action which border on the supernatural, if in the events of practical life the supernatural were recognizable. Is it he who is in secret communication with us by the well in Granite House, and has he thus a knowledge of all our plans? Was it he who threw us that bottle, when the vessel made her first cruise? Was it he who threw Top out of the lake, and killed the dugong? Was it he, who as everything leads us to believe, saved you from the waves, and that under circumstances in which any one else would not have been able to act? If it was he, he possesses a power which renders him master of the elements."

The reporter's reasoning was just, and every one felt it to be so.

“Yes,” rejoined Cyrus Harding, “if the intervention of a human being is not more questionable for us, I agree that he has at his disposal means of action beyond those possessed by humanity. There is a mystery still, but if we discover the man, the mystery will be discovered also. The question, then, is, ought we to respect the incognito of this generous being, or ought we to do everything to find him out? What is your opinion on the matter?”

“My opinion,” said Pencroft, “is that, whoever he may be, he is a brave man, and he has my esteem!”

“Be it so,” answered Harding, “but that is not an answer, Pencroft.”

“Master,” then said Neb, “my idea is, that we may search as long as we like for this gentleman whom you are talking about, but that we shall not discover him till he pleases.”

“That’s not bad, what you say, Neb,” observed Pencroft.

“I am of Neb’s opinion,” said Gideon Spilett, “but that is no reason for not attempting the adventure. Whether we find this mysterious being or not, we shall at least have fulfilled our duty towards him.”

“And you, my boy, give us your opinion,” said the engineer, turning to Herbert.

“Oh,” cried Herbert, his countenance full of animation, “how I should like to thank him, he who saved you first, and who has now saved us!”

“Of course, my boy,” replied Pencroft, “so would I and all of us. I am not inquisitive, but I would give one of my eyes to see this individual face to face! It seems to me that he must be handsome, tall, strong, with a splendid beard, radiant hair, and that he must be seated on clouds, a great ball in his hands!”

“But, Pencroft,” answered Spilett, “you are describing a picture of the Creator.”

“Possibly, Mr. Spilett,” replied the sailor, “but that is how I imagine him!”

“And you, Ayrton?” asked the engineer.

“Captain Harding,” replied Ayrton, “I can give you no better advice in this matter. Whatever you do will be best; when you wish me to join you in your researches, I am ready to follow you.

“I thank you, Ayrton,” answered Cyrus Harding, “but I should like a more direct answer to the question I put to you. You are our companion; you have already endangered your life several times for us, and you, as well as the rest, ought to be consulted in the matter of any important decision. Speak, therefore.”

“Captain Harding,” replied Ayrton, “I think that we ought to do everything to discover this unknown benefactor. Perhaps he is alone. Perhaps he is suffering. Perhaps he has a life to be renewed. I, too, as you said, have a debt of gratitude to pay him. It was he, it could be only he who must have come to Tabor Island, who found there the wretch you knew, and who made

known to you that there was an unfortunate man there to be saved. Therefore it is, thanks to him, that I have become a man again. No, I will never forget him!”

“That is settled, then,” said Cyrus Harding. “We will begin our researches as soon as possible. We will not leave a corner of the island unexplored. We will search into its most secret recesses, and will hope that our unknown friend will pardon us in consideration of our intentions!”

For several days the colonists were actively employed in haymaking and the harvest. Before putting their project of exploring the yet unknown parts of the island into execution, they wished to get all possible work finished. It was also the time for collecting the various vegetables from the Tabor Island plants. All was stowed away, and happily there was no want of room in Granite House, in which they might have housed all the treasures of the island. The products of the colony were there, methodically arranged, and in a safe place, as may be believed, sheltered as much from animals as from man.

There was no fear of damp in the middle of that thick mass of granite. Many natural excavations situated in the upper passage were enlarged either by pick-axe or mine, and Granite House thus became a general warehouse, containing all the provisions, arms, tools, and spare utensils—in a word, all the stores of the colony.

As to the guns obtained from the brig, they were pretty pieces of ordnance, which, at Pencroft’s entreaty, were hoisted by means of tackle and pulleys, right up into Granite House; embrasures were made between the windows, and the shining muzzles of the guns could soon be seen through the granite cliff. From this height they commanded all Union Bay. It was like a little Gibraltar, and any vessel anchored off the islet would inevitably be exposed to the fire of this aerial battery.

“Captain,” said Pencroft one day, it was the 8th of November, “now that our fortifications are finished, it would be a good thing if we tried the range of our guns.”

“Do you think that is useful?” asked the engineer.

“It is more than useful, it is necessary! Without that how are we to know to what distance we can send one of those pretty shot with which we are provided?”

“Try them, Pencroft,” replied the engineer. “However, I think that in making the experiment, we ought to employ, not the ordinary powder, the supply of which, I think, should remain untouched, but the pyroxyle which will never fail us.”

“Can the cannon support the shock of the pyroxyle?” asked the reporter, who was not less anxious than Pencroft to try the artillery of Granite House.

“I believe so. However,” added the engineer, “we will be prudent.” The engineer was right in thinking that the guns were of excellent make. Made of forged steel, and breech-loaders, they ought consequently to be able to bear a considerable charge, and also have an enormous range. In fact, as regards practical effect, the transit described by the ball ought to be as extended as possible, and this tension could only be obtained under the condition that the projectile should be impelled with a very great initial velocity.

“Now,” said Harding to his companions, “the initial velocity is in proportion to the quantity of powder used. In the fabrication of these pieces, everything depends on employing a metal with the highest possible power of resistance, and steel is incontestably that metal of all others which resists the best. I have, therefore, reason to believe that our guns will bear without risk the expansion of the pyroxyle gas, and will give excellent results.”

“We shall be a great deal more certain of that when we have tried them!” answered Pencroft.

It is unnecessary to say that the four cannons were in perfect order. Since they had been taken from the water, the sailor had bestowed great care upon them. How many hours he had spent, in rubbing, greasing, and polishing them, and in cleaning the mechanism! And now the pieces were as brilliant as if they had been on board a frigate of the United States Navy.

On this day, therefore, in presence of all the members of the colony, including Master Jup and Top, the four cannon were successively tried. They were charged with pyroxyle, taking into consideration its explosive power, which, as has been said, is four times that of ordinary powder: the projectile to be fired was cylindroconic.

Pencroft, holding the end of the quick-match, stood ready to fire.

At Harding’s signal, he fired. The shot, passing over the islet, fell into the sea at a distance which could not be calculated with exactitude.

The second gun was pointed at the rocks at the end of Flotsam Point, and the shot striking a sharp rock nearly three miles from Granite House, made it fly into splinters. It was Herbert who had pointed this gun and fired it, and very proud he was of his first shot. Pencroft only was prouder than he! Such a shot, the honor of which belonged to his dear boy.

The third shot, aimed this time at the downs forming the upper side of Union Bay, struck the sand at a distance of four miles, then having ricocheted: was lost in the sea in a cloud of spray.

For the fourth piece Cyrus Harding slightly increased the charge, so as to try its extreme range. Then, all standing aside for fear of its bursting, the match was lighted by means of a long cord.

A tremendous report was heard, but the piece had held good, and the colonists rushing to the windows, saw the shot graze the rocks of Mandible Cape, nearly five miles from Granite House, and disappear in Shark Gulf.

“Well, captain,” exclaimed Pencroft, whose cheers might have rivaled the reports themselves, “what do you say of our battery? All the pirates in the Pacific have only to present themselves before Granite House! Not one can land there now without our permission!”

“Believe me, Pencroft,” replied the engineer, “it would be better not to have to make the experiment.”

“Well,” said the sailor, “what ought to be done with regard to those six villains who are roaming about the island? Are we to leave them to overrun our forests, our fields, our

plantations? These pirates are regular jaguars, and it seems to me we ought not to hesitate to treat them as such! What do you think, Ayrton?" added Pencroft, turning to his companion.

Ayrton hesitated at first to reply, and Cyrus Harding regretted that Pencroft had so thoughtlessly put this question. And he was much moved when Ayrton replied in a humble tone,—

"I have been one of those jaguars, Mr. Pencroft. I have no right to speak."

And with a slow step he walked away.

Pencroft understood.

"What a brute I am!" he exclaimed. "Poor Ayrton! He has as much right to speak here as any one!"

"Yes," said Gideon Spilett, "but his reserve does him honor, and it is right to respect the feeling which he has about his sad past."

"Certainly, Mr. Spilett," answered the sailor, "and there is no fear of my doing so again. I would rather bite my tongue off than cause Ayrton any pain! But to return to the question. It seems to me that these ruffians have no right to any pity, and that we ought to rid the island of them as soon as possible."

"Is that your opinion, Pencroft?" asked the engineer.

"Quite my opinion."

"And before hunting them mercilessly, you would not wait until they had committed some fresh act of hostility against us?"

"Isn't what they have done already enough?" asked Pencroft, who did not understand these scruples.

"They may adopt other sentiments!" said Harding, "and perhaps repent."

"They repent!" exclaimed the sailor, shrugging his shoulders.

"Pencroft, think of Ayrton!" said Herbert, taking the sailor's hand. "He became an honest man again!"

Pencroft looked at his companions one after the other. He had never thought of his proposal being met with any objection. His rough nature could not allow that they ought to come to terms with the rascals who had landed on the island with Bob Harvey's accomplices, the murderers of the crew of the "Speedy," and he looked upon them as wild beasts which ought to be destroyed without delay and without remorse.

"Come!" said he. "Everybody is against me! You wish to be generous to those villains! Very well; I hope we mayn't repent it!"

“What danger shall we run,” said Herbert, “if we take care to be always on our guard?”

“Hum!” observed the reporter, who had not given any decided opinion. “They are six and well armed. If they each lay hid in a corner, and each fired at one of us, they would soon be masters of the colony!”

“Why have they not done so?” said Herbert. “No doubt because it was not their interest to do it. Besides, we are six also.”

“Well, well!” replied Pencroft, whom no reasoning could have convinced. “Let us leave these good people to do what they like, and don’t think anything more about them!”

“Come, Pencroft,” said Neb, “don’t make yourself out so bad as all that! Suppose one of these unfortunate men were here before you, within good range of your guns, you would not fire.”

“I would fire on him as I would on a mad dog, Neb,” replied Pencroft coldly.

“Pencroft,” said the engineer, “you have always shown much deference to my advice; will you, in this matter, yield to me?”

“I will do as you please, Captain Harding,” answered the sailor, who was not at all convinced.

“Very well, wait, and we will not attack them unless we are attacked first.”

Thus their behavior towards the pirates was agreed upon, although Pencroft augured nothing good from it. They were not to attack them, but were to be on their guard. After all, the island was large and fertile. If any sentiment of honesty yet remained in the bottom of their hearts, these wretches might perhaps be reclaimed. Was it not their interest in the situation in which they found themselves to begin a new life? At any rate, for humanity’s sake alone, it would be right to wait. The colonists would no longer as before, be able to go and come without fear. Hitherto they had only wild beasts to guard against, and now six convicts of the worst description, perhaps, were roaming over their island. It was serious, certainly, and to less brave men, it would have been security lost! No matter! At present, the colonists had reason on their side against Pencroft. Would they be right in the future? That remained to be seen.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)

THE WANDERER'S NECKLACE by H Rider Haggard

Book II: Byzantium

Chapter IX: The Hall of The Pit

The days and the nights went by, but which was day and which was night I knew not, save for the visits of the jailers with my meals—I who was blind, I who should never see the light again. At first I suffered much, but by degrees the pain died away. Also a physician came to tend my hurts, a skilful man. Soon I discovered, however, that he had another object. He pitied my state, so much, indeed, he said, that he offered to supply me with a drug that, if I were willing to take it, would make an end of me painlessly. Now I understood at once that Irene desired my death, and, fearing to cause it, set the means of self-murder within my reach.

I thanked the man and begged him to give me the drug, which he did, whereon I hid it away in my garments. When it was seen that I still lived although I had asked for the medicine, I think that Irene believed this was because it had failed to work, or that such a means of death did not please me. So she found another. One evening when a jailer brought my supper he pressed something heavy into my hand, which I felt to be a sword.

“What weapon is this?” I asked, “and why do you give it to me?”

“It is your own sword,” answered the man, “which I was commanded to return to you. I know no more.”

Then he went away, leaving the sword with me.

I drew the familiar blade from its sheath, the red blade that the Wanderer had worn, and touching its keen edge with my fingers, wept from my blinded eyes to think that never again could I hold it aloft in war or see the light flash from it as I smote. Yes, I wept in my weakness, till I remembered that I had no longer any wish to be the death of men. So I sheathed the good sword and hid it beneath my mattress lest some jailer should steal it, which, as I could not see him, he might do easily. Also I desired to put away temptation.

I think that this hour after the bringing of the sword, which stirred up so many memories, was the most fearful of all my hours, so fearful that, had it been prolonged, death would have come to me of its own accord. I had sunk to misery's lowest deep, who did not know that even then its tide was turning, who could not dream of all the blessed years that lay before me, the years of love and of such peaceful joy as even the blind may win.

That night Martina came—Martina, who was Hope's harbinger. I heard the door of my prison open and close softly, and sat still, wondering whether the murderers had entered at last, wondering, too, whether I should snatch the sword and strike blindly till I fell. Next I heard another sound, that of a woman weeping; yes, and felt my hand lifted and pressed to a woman's lips, which kissed it again and yet again. A thought struck me, and I began to draw it back. A soft voice spoke between its sobs.

“Have no fear, Olaf. I am Martina. Oh, now I understand why yonder tigress sent me on that distant mission.”

“How did you come here, Martina?” I asked.

“I still have the signet, Olaf, which Irene, who begins to mistrust me, forgets. Only this morning I learned the truth on my return to the palace; yet I have not been idle. Within an hour Jodd and the Northmen knew it also. Within three they had blinded every hostage whom they held, aye, and caught two of the brutes who did the deed on you, and crucified them upon their barrack walls.”

“Oh! Martina,” I broke in, “I did not desire that others who are innocent should share my woes.”

“Nor did I, Olaf; but these Northmen are ill to play with. Moreover, in a sense it was needful. You do not know what I have learned—that to-morrow Irene proposed to slit your tongue also because you can tell too much, and afterwards to cut off your right hand lest you, who are learned, should write down what you know. I told the Northmen—never mind how. They sent a herald, a Greek whom they had captured, and, covering him with arrows, made him call out that if your tongue was slit they would know of it and slit the tongues of all the hostages also, and that if your hand was cut off they could cut off their hands, and take another vengeance which for the present they keep secret.”

“At least they are faithful,” I said. “But, oh! tell me, Martina, what of Heliodore?”

“This,” she whispered into my ear. “Heliodore and her father sailed an hour after sunset and are now safe upon the sea, bound for Egypt.”

“Then I was right! When Irene told me she was dead she lied.”

“Aye, if she said that she lied, though thrice she has striven to murder her, I have no time to tell you how, but was always baffled by those who watched. Yet she might have succeeded at last, so, although Heliodore fought against it, it was best that she should go. Those who are parted may meet again; but how can we meet one who is dead until we too are dead?”

“How did she go?”

“Smuggled from the city disguised as a boy attending on a priest, and that priest her father shorn of his beard and tonsured. The Bishop Barnabas passed them out in his following.”

“Then blessings on the Bishop Barnabas,” I said.

“Aye, blessings on him, since without his help it could never have been done. The secret agents at the port stared hard at those two, although the good bishop vouched for them and gave their names and offices. Still, when they saw some rough-looking fellows dressed like sailors approach, playing with the handles of their knives, the agents thought well to ask no more questions. Moreover, now that the ship has sailed, for their own sakes they’ll swear that no such priest and boy went aboard of her. So your Heliodore is away unharmed, as is her father, though his mission has come to naught. Still, his life is left in him, for which he may be thankful, who on such a business should have brought no woman. If he had come alone, Olaf, your eyes would have been left to you, and set by now upon the orb of empire that your hand had grasped.”

“Yet I am glad that he did not come alone, Martina.”

“Truly you have a high and faithful heart, and that woman should be honoured whom you love. What is the secret? There must be more in it than the mere desire for a woman’s beauty, though I know that at times this can make men mad. In such a business the soul must play its part.”

“I think so, Martina. Indeed, I believe so, since otherwise we suffer much in vain. Now tell me, how and when do I die?”

“I hope you will not die at all, Olaf. Certain plans are laid which even here I dare not whisper. To-morrow I hear they will lead you again before the judges, who, by Irene’s clemency, will change your sentence to one of banishment, with secret orders to kill you on the voyage. But you will never make that voyage. Other schemes are afoot; you’ll learn of them afterwards.”

“Yet, Martina, if you know these plots the Augusta knows them also, since you and she are one.”

“When those dagger points were thrust into your eyes, Olaf, they cut the thread that bound us, and now Irene and I are more far apart than hell and heaven. I tell you that for your sake I hate her and work her downfall. Am I not your god-mother, Olaf?”

Then again she kissed my hand and presently was gone.

On the following morning, as I supposed it to be, my jailers came and said to me that I must appear before the judges to hear some revision of my sentence. They dressed me in my soldier’s gear, and even allowed me to gird my sword about me, knowing, doubtless, that, save to himself, a blind man could do no mischief with a sword. Then they led me I know not whither by passages which turned now here, now there. At length we entered some place, for doors were closed behind us.

“This is the Hall of Judgment,” said one of them, “but the judges have not yet come. It is a great room and bare. There is nothing in it against which you can hurt yourself. Therefore, if it pleases you after being cramped so long in that narrow cell, you may walk to and fro, keeping your hands in front of you so that you will know when you touch the further wall and must turn.”

I thanked them and, glad enough to avail myself of this grace for my limbs were stiff with want of exercise, began to walk joyfully. I thought that the room must be one of those numberless apartments which opened on to the terrace, since distinctly I could hear the wash of the sea coming from far beneath, doubtless through the open window-places.

Forward I stepped boldly, but at a certain point in my march this curious thing happened. A hand seemed to seize my own and draw me to the left. Wondering, I followed the guidance of the hand, which presently left hold of mine. Thereon I continued my march, and as I did so, thought that I heard another sound, like to that of a suppressed murmur of human voices. Twenty steps more and I reached the end of the chamber, for my outstretched fingers touched its marble wall. I turned and marched back, and lo! at the twentieth step that hand took mine again and led me to the right, whereon once more the murmur of voices reached me.

Thrice this happened, and every time the murmur grew more loud. Indeed, I thought I heard one say,

“The man’s not blind at all,” and another, “Some spirit guides him.”

As I made my fourth journey I caught the sound of a distant tumult, the shouts of war, the screams of agony, and above them all the well-remembered cry of “Valhalla! Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!”

I halted where I was and felt the blood rush into my wasted cheeks. The Northmen, my Northmen, were in the palace! It was at this that Martina had hinted. Yet in so vast a place what chance was there that they would ever find me, and how, being blind, could I find them? Well, at least my voice was left to me, and I would lift it.

So with all my strength I cried aloud, “Olaf Red-Sword is here! To Olaf, men of the North!”

Thrice I cried. I heard folk running, not to me, but from me, doubtless those whose whispers had reached my ears.

I thought of trying to follow them, but the soft and gentle hand, which was like to that of a woman, once more clasped mine and held me where I was, suffering me to move no single inch. So there I stood, even after the hand had loosed me again, for it seemed to me that there was something most strange in this business.

Presently another sound arose, the sound of the Northmen pouring towards the hall, for feet clanged louder and louder down the marble corridors. More, they had met those who were running from the hall, for now these fled back before them. They were in the hall, for a cry of horror, mingled with rage, broke from their lips.

“‘Tis Olaf,” said one, “Olaf blinded, and, by Thor, see where he stands!”

Then Jodd’s voice roared out,

“Move not, Olaf; move not, or you die.”

Another voice, that of Martina, broke in, “Silence, you fool, or you’ll frighten him and make him fall. Silence all, and leave him to me!”

Then quiet fell upon the place; it seemed that even the pursued grew quiet, and I heard the rustle of a woman’s dress drawing towards me. Next instant a soft hand took my own, just such a hand as not long ago had seemed to guide and hold me, and Martina’s voice said,

“Follow where I lead, Olaf.”

So I followed eight or ten paces. Then Martina threw her arms about me and burst into wild laughter. Someone caught her away; next moment two hair-clad lips kissed me on the brow and the mighty voice of Jodd shouted,

“Thanks be to all the gods, dwell they in the north or in the south! We have saved you! Know you where you stood, Olaf? On the brink of a pit, the very brink, and beneath is a fall of a

hundred feet to where the waters of the Bosphorus wash among the rocks. Oh! understand this pretty Grecian game. They, good Christian folk, would not have your blood upon their souls, and therefore they caused you to walk to your own death. Well, they shall be dosed with the draught they brewed.

“Bring them hither, comrades, bring them one by one, these devils who could sit to watch a blind man walk to his doom to make their sport. Ah! whom have we here? Why, by Thor! ‘tis the lawyer knave, he who was president of the court that tried you, and was angry because you did not salute him. Well, lawyer, the wheel has gone round. We Northmen are in possession of the palace and the Armenian legions are gathered at its gates and do but wait for Constantine the Emperor to enter and take the empire and its crown. They’ll be here anon, lawyer, but you understand, having a certain life to save, for word had been brought to us of your pretty doings, that we were forced to strike before the signal, and struck not in vain. Now we’ll fill in the tedious time with a trial of our own. See here, I am president of the court, seated in this fine chair, and these six to right and left are my companion judges, while you seven who were judges are now prisoners. You know the crime with which you are charged, so there’s no need to set it out. Your defence, lawyer, and be swift with it.”

“Oh! sir,” said the man in a trembling voice, “what we did to the General Olaf we were ordered to do by one who may not be named.”

“You’d best find the name, lawyer, for were it that of a god we Northmen would hear it.”

“Well, then, by the Augusta herself. She wished the death of the noble Michael, or Olaf, but having become superstitious about the matter, would not have his blood directly on her hands. Therefore she bethought her of this plan. He was ordered to be brought into the place you see, which is known as the Hall of the Pit, that in old days was used by certain bloody-minded emperors to rid them of their enemies. The central pavement swings upon a hinge. At a touch it opens, and he who has thought it sound and walked thereon, when darkness comes is lost, since he falls upon the rocks far below, and at high tide the water takes him.”

“Yes, yes, we understand the game, lawyer, for there yawns the open pit. But have you aught more to say?”

“Nothing, sir, nothing, save that we only did what we were driven to do. Moreover, no harm has come of it, since whenever the noble general came to the edge of the opened pit, although he was blind, he halted and went off to right or left as though someone drew him out of danger.”

“Well, then, cruel and unjust judges, who could gather to mock at the murder of a blinded man that you had trapped to his doom——”

“Sir,” broke in one of them, “it was not we who tried to trap him; it was those jailers who stand there. They told the general that he might exercise himself by walking up and down the hall.”

“Is that true, Olaf?” asked Jodd.

“Yes,” I answered, “it is true that the two jailers who brought me here did tell me this, though whether those men are present I cannot say.”

“Very good,” said Jodd. “Add them to the other prisoners, who by their own showing heard them set the snare and did not warn the victim. Now, murderers all, this is the sentence of the court upon you: That you salute the General Olaf and confess your wickedness to him.”

So they saluted me, kneeling, and kissing my feet, and one and all made confession of their crime.

“Enough,” I said, “I pardon them who are but tools. Pray to God that He may do as much.”

“You may pardon here, Olaf,” said Jodd, “and your God may pardon hereafter, but we, the Northmen, do not pardon. Blindfold those men and bind their arms. Now,” went on Jodd after a pause, “their turn has come to show us sport. Run, friends, run, for swords are behind you. Can you not feel them?”

The rest may be guessed. Within a few minutes the seven judges and the two jailers had vanished from the world. No hand came to save them from the cruel rocks and the waters that seethed a hundred feet below that dreadful chamber.

This fantastic, savage vengeance was a thing dreadful to hear; what it must have been to see I can only guess. I know that I wished I might have fled from it and that I pleaded with Jodd for mercy on these men. But neither he nor his companions would listen to me.

“What mercy had they on you?” he cried. “Let them drink from their own cup.”

“Let them drink from their own cup!” roared his companions, and then broke into a roar of laughter as one of the false judges, feeling space before him, leapt, leapt short, and with a shriek departed for ever.

It was over. I heard someone enter the hall and whisper in Jodd’s ear; heard his answer also.

“Let her be brought hither,” he said. “For the rest, bid the captains hold Stauracius and the others fast. If there is any sign of stir against us, cut their throats, advising them that this will be done should they allow trouble to arise. Do not fire the palace unless I give the word, for it would be a pity to burn so fine a building. It is those who dwell in it who should be burned; but doubtless Constantine will see to that. Collect the richest of the booty, that which is most portable, and let it be carried to our quarters in the baggage carts. See that these things are done quickly, before the Armenians get their hands into the bag. I’ll be with you soon; but if the Emperor Constantine should arrive first, tell him that all has gone well, better than he hoped, indeed, and pray him to come hither, where we may take counsel.”

The messenger went. Jodd and some of the Northmen began to consult together, and Martina led me aside.

“Tell me what has chanced, Martina,” I asked, “for I am bewildered.”

“A revolution, that is all, Olaf. Jodd and the Northmen are the point of the spear, its handle is Constantine, and the hands that hold it are the Armenians. It has been very well done. Some of the guards who remained were bribed, others frightened away. Only a few fought, and of them the Northmen made short work. Irene and her ministers were fooled. They thought the

blow would not fall for a week or more, if at all, since the Empress believed that she had appeased Constantine by her promises. I'll tell you more later."

"How did you find me, Martina, and in time?"

"Oh! Olaf, it is a terrible story. Almost I swoon again to think of it. It was thus: Irene discovered that I had visited you in your cell; she grew suspicious of me. This morning I was seized and ordered to surrender the signet; but first I had heard that they planned your death to-day, not a sentence of banishment and murder afar off, as I told you. My last act before I was taken was to dispatch a trusted messenger to Jodd and the Northmen, telling them that if they would save you alive they must strike at once, and not to-night, as had been arranged. Within thirty seconds after he had left my side the eunuchs had me and took me to my chamber, where they barred me in. A while later the Augusta came raging like a lioness. She accused me of treachery, and when I denied it struck me in the face. Look, here are the marks of the jewels on her hands. Oh, alas! what said I? You cannot see. She had learned that the lady Heliodore had escaped her, and that I had some hand in her escape. She vowed that I, your god-mother, was your lover, and as this is a crime against the Church, promised me that after other sufferings I should be burned alive in the Hippodrome before all the people. Lastly she said this, 'Know that your Olaf of whom you are so fond dies within an hour and thus: He will be taken to the Hall of the Pit and there given leave to walk till the judges come. Being blind, you may guess where he will walk. Before this door is unlocked again I tell you he'll be but a heap of splintered bones. Aye, you may start and weep; but save your tears for yourself,' and she called me a foul name. 'I have got you fast at length, you night-prowling cat, and God Himself cannot give you strength to stretch out your hand and guide this accursed Olaf from the edge of the Pit of Death.'

"'God alone knows what He can do, Augusta,' I answered, for the words seemed to be put into my lips.

"Then she cursed and struck me again, and so left me barred in my chamber.

"When she had gone I flung myself upon my knees and prayed to God to save you, Olaf, since I was helpless; prayed as I had never prayed before. Praying thus, I think that I fell into a swoon, for my agony was more than I could bear, and in the swoon I dreamed. I dreamed that I stood in this place, where till now I have never been before. I saw the judges, the jailers, and a few others watching from that gallery. I saw you walk along the hall towards the great open pit. Then I seemed to glide to you and take your hand and guide you round the pit. And, Olaf, this happened thrice. Afterwards came a tumult while you were on the very edge of the pit and I held you, not suffering you to stir. Then in rushed the Northmen and I with them. Yes, standing there with you upon the edge of the pit, I saw myself and the Northmen rush into the hall."

"Martina," I whispered, "a hand that seemed to be a woman's did guide me thrice round the edge of the pit, and did hold me almost until you and the Northmen rushed in."

"Oh! God is great!" she gasped. "God is very great, and to Him I give thanks. But hearken to the end of the tale. I awoke from my swoon and heard noise without, and above it the Northmen's cry of victory. They had scaled the palace walls or broken in the gates—as yet I know not which—they were on the terrace driving the Greek guards before them. I ran to the window-place and there below me saw Jodd. I screamed till he heard me.

““Save me if you would save Olaf,’ I cried. ‘I am prisoned here.’

“They brought one of their scaling ladders and drew me through the window. I told them all I knew. They caught a palace eunuch and beat him till he promised to lead us to this hall. He led, but in the labyrinth of passages fell down senseless, for they had struck him too hard. We knew not which way to turn, till suddenly we heard your voice and ran towards it.

“That is all the story, Olaf.”

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)

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

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

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Gavin Chappell will be presiding over this anthology.

Email your submission as an attachment to: editor@schlock.co.uk

The email subject line must read 'SUBMISSION SAC: Dark Age—your story title' or your submission will not be considered for this anthology.

Successful applicants will be notified before the deadline has expired.