

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

# **Schlock!**

**WEBZINE**

VOL. 14, ISSUE 1  
2 DECEMBER 2018

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## SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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

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

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## EDITORIAL

This week we have the story of a road accident with a sting in the tail. Meanwhile, Earless Clint meets his strange end. Peter Foster tells us all about the most popular of all the undead. And Kassi returns, this time for some archaeology aboard her strange world.

Another of the Undead encounters one of the Living with morbid tastes. Mokem Bet gives Carter Ward a good talking-to. Malone yearns to escape the prehistoric plateau. And the Norseman Olaf yields to racial insanity.

—Gavin Chappell

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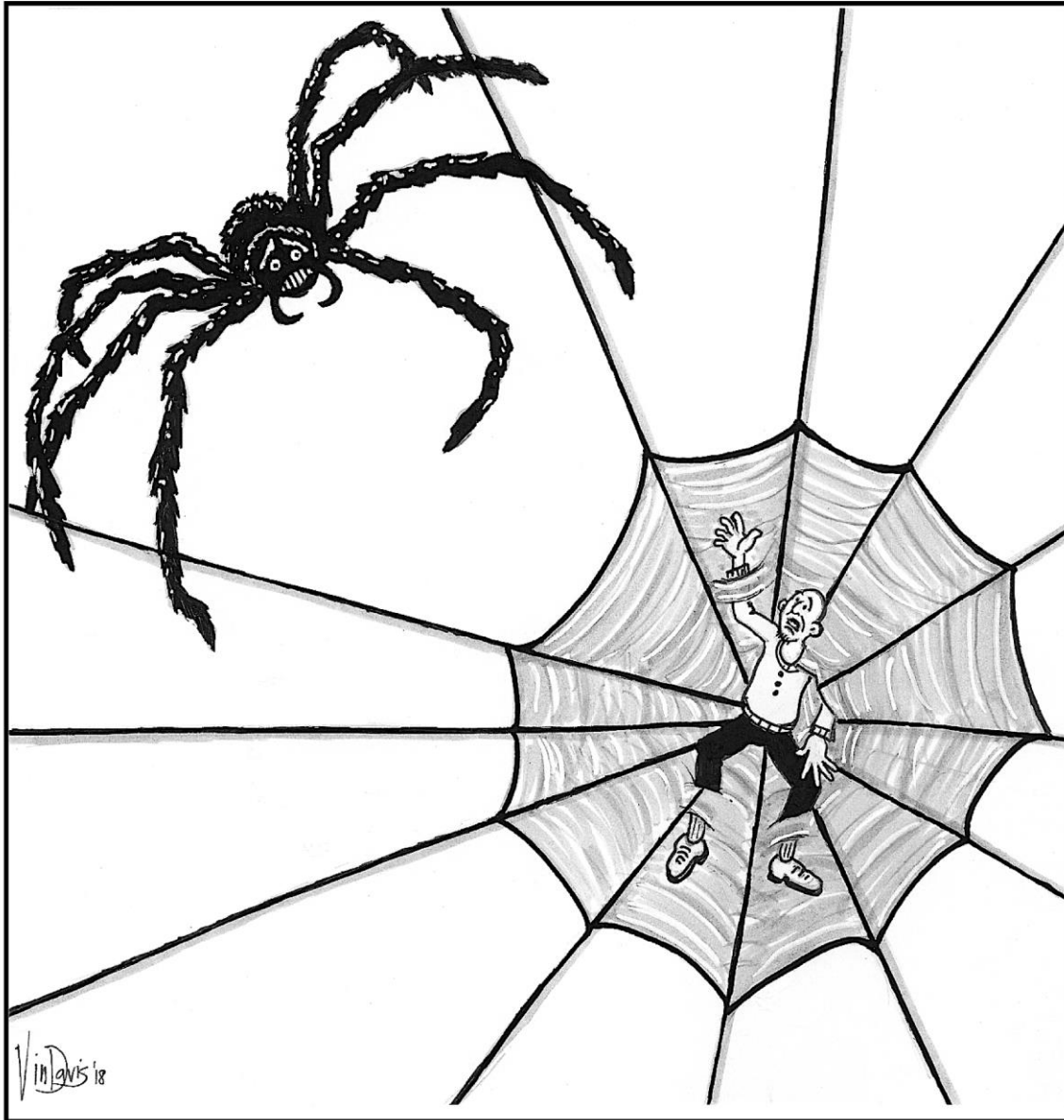


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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

## IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"THIS IS A PROBLEM, ANYTHING WITH LESS THAN SIX LEGS CREEPS ME OUT."

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

*In 2013, his work in END TIMES won an award in the Best Horror Anthology category for that*

*year. When Vincent is not at his drawing board he can be found in the classroom teaching cartooning and illustration to his students at Westchester Community College in Valhalla NY.*

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

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## THE ACCIDENT by Michelle Podsiedlik

A year after Paul Kimble's hit-and-run death, it was clear the driver would never be found. But blame needs a channel, outrage must expend, and Wayne Barrett was the only visible target.

Wayne had been the last to see Kimble alive (what about the killer? Wayne fumed whenever the phrase appeared in the Jackson, New Hampshire news. The killer certainly saw Kimble fly into that ditch). Both men were on their morning jogs, Wayne going up the wooded Route 18 while Kimble was coming down. Minutes after their customary nod Kimble was mangled by a vehicle which, logically, must have also passed Wayne.

Taking a bad bounce (the worst bounce, a horrific bounce, a body should never bounce), Kimble had landed in brush. When Wayne passed the area on his way back home, he had no idea Kimble was bleeding to death yards away.

"You didn't see his shoe?" the policeman asked Wayne hours later, the tone not yet accusatory. That would come later. At that moment, they were standing near the front desk of Mountain Valley Realty, Wayne's secretary watching, the other agents pretending not to listen.

One of Kimble's white shoes had remained laced and upright on the pavement after his body was knocked from it. It was how his widow discovered her new marital status when he was late coming back from his run. She drove slowly up Route 18, expecting a twisted ankle or fainting spell, not a body with more blood out than in.

"What did the vehicle look like?" the officer asked. He was a young guy, relishing the pen and notepad in his hands, the power he held as the Interviewer. "Make, model, plate?"

Wayne stared back, the silence of the agents and secretary behind him like fingers groping in his mind, waiting for him to reveal the clues. Someone, at some desk, would then say, "That sounds like Jimmy Wilkins' car," or "Alice Sprague drives an old red Ford."

But what he actually said, what hounded him every day since, was: "I don't remember."

"Colour?" the officer tried, his expression saying that even a child would notice the colour of a car.

It was worse. Wayne couldn't recall any vehicles passing him on Route 18 that morning. As far as he remembered, the road had been empty. The only moment preserved in his mind was nodding at Kimble.

The silence behind him grew, his co-workers creating their narrative. Paul Kimble, beloved English teacher at Jackson High, was dead and Wayne Barrett, the face of Mountain Valley Realty, was offering no help in finding his killer.



By the time Wayne returned to his desk, the story was already circulating through town, punctuated every time with: If Wayne Barrett had been paying any attention, they could catch the guy who did it.

And so began the year of dark looks, sellers listing with other agents, Charlotte acting strangely at home. Wayne would look up from his laptop to find her studying him, as though his memories could be pulled out through force of will. She wanted him to see a hypnotist, a psychic, the pastor at the Congo Church. She came home with books about regression, locked traumas, guided meditation. When these were left unread, the appointments never made, she fell back on the phrase she'd used obsessively after her parents died: "Everything happens for a reason." She could repeat it a dozen times an evening, no prompting or context required.

When Wayne had continued jogging on Route 18 in the spring, the murmurs started again with a vengeance. Distasteful, people said. Disrespectful. The agency assigned him exclusively with out-of-town inquiries and showings. Charlotte drifted through the house, intoning, "Everything happens for a reason."

The second week of April, he'd left the house to find Andrew Hines at the bottom of his driveway, dressed like an obese version of Dustin Hoffman in *Marathon Man*; baggy hooded sweatshirt, small white shorts.

"Hey, neighbour," Andrew said, smiling his simple, dumb smile. "Wondering if you'd take on a partner?"

The church had put him up to this. Under the guise of saving Wayne Barrett's guilt-laden soul, the church elders wanted the coup of converting the least-liked man in Jackson. They fantasized about a tearful Sunday morning plea for forgiveness.

They should have picked an emissary in better shape, Wayne thought. Andrew made it less than a mile that first morning before he had to waddle back, red-faced and bent double. But he was at Wayne's mailbox again the next day. And the next. Now, half a year later, October nearly finished, they were up to Wayne's original six-mile route. Andrew's softness had receded, revealing a broad, football-player's body, but he never ceased his *aw-shucks, by the way what do you think about Jesus?* routine. Between his talk of God's plan and Charlotte's insistence on fate, Wayne was starting to believe there was a reason Paul Kimble died that morning and Wayne was spared, a reason Wayne couldn't remember the car. There had to be a point in coming out here every day, a design in the whole town turning against him.

Snow was in the forecast for Friday and Wayne jogged this morning, almost a year to the day since Kimble's death, desperate to have his meeting with fate before winter set in. He listened to the uneven smack of Andrew Hines' shoes on the frosty pavement behind him, the huffing breaths following Wayne like a friendly spectre.

They turned the corner where Paul Kimble's body had been found, the spot where Wayne daily replayed the past year. He looked at the white cross planted by Kimble's wife and son, the paint starting to fade but the three ragged letters clear enough: DAD.

The cross haunted him yet he was drawn to it, the way kids creep toward graveyards then run past, holding their breath. There was the sickening thrill of knowing this was the spot; if Wayne had left the house five minutes earlier or later that morning, he could have been the dead one. He could have seen it happen. He could have stopped it. But something hadn't wanted that. Something had wanted Wayne Barrett to live, to continue coming here. He wasn't sure what to call it, but it was with him all the time now. He had dreams of Kimble, dreams of this mountain and the cross. Some mornings he wondered *Am I dreaming now? Is this happening? How can we know a dream when we're in a dream?*

Andrew had been wheezing for several seconds before Wayne understood that he was saying a word, repeating it almost desperately: Car! Wayne stepped to the road's shoulder as a van jerkily rounded the blind corner.

Andrew gave a friendly half-wave to the van, oblivious that he had probably just saved Wayne's life and Wayne wondered if this had been it, if the fated event was about Andrew and not himself. Immediately, he felt hollow and cheated. He glanced at Andrew, anger pooling through his veins and Andrew looked back with the peace of a saint, waiting for Wayne to give the signal to start again. But then—

"Wait a second—" Wayne said, as though Andrew had been arguing. The anger evaporated and a strange, dreamy feeling came over him; the sense that he'd been here before, he'd been here forever. "Wait—"

Andrew, between heavy breaths, asked, "You okay?"

"Listen."

Looking worried, Andrew said, "Hey, do you need to sit down or something?"

"Shut up. Listen."

Andrew blinked in surprise but stopped talking. The sound was faint and muffled, coming from every direction and none: a man's voice. Calling for help.

Instinctively, Wayne looked over to Kimble's cross. How many dreams had started this way?

"Sounds like an animal," Andrew said, but his face drained of colour as he scanned the trees.

Wayne started along the gravel shoulder, looking down the hill, up the mountain. His body buzzed with the sensation of being watched, of another person standing at his side. The call came again with that everywhere-at-once echo. Wayne gave the cross one more glance as an oddly silent Andrew started to follow him. They reached the yellow-and-black road sign at the next bend; a sharply curved line with an arrow for a head. A dozen yards farther, another yellow sign recommended slowing. Just beyond that, two lines in the frosty grass went straight while the road turned to the right.

There were no skid marks on the pavement; no attempt had been made to brake. Wayne and Andrew approached the tire tracks, only seeing the broken blue sedan when they reached the very edge of the pavement.

The car had started rolling halfway down, leaving impressions like a giant's footprints before it was caught by a line of trees. It was now resting wheels-up, looking like a long-abandoned growth in the New England landscape.

The two men stood dumbly by the road, waiting for the sedan to make the next move. Something was supposed to happen now: smoke billowing from the hood, fire, screams. But the car remained still, its silence more disturbing than any dramatics Wayne could imagine.

"It's stopped," Andrew said.

Of course it's stopped, Wayne thought, it's upside-down. Then he realized what Andrew meant. The plea for help had gone silent.

"They must have gotten out," Andrew said.

"In the past thirty seconds?"

"No." Andrew gestured vaguely along the sharp turn. "He's already on the road. He was shouting from the road."

"Or he's still in the car," Wayne said, realizing the implication as he spoke. There weren't many reasons why the shouting man would have stopped.

Andrew reached down to the pouch strapped around his ankle. "I'll call for help," he said, his shaking hands missing the zipper twice before managing to get his cell phone out. "One of us should wait up here so they know where to stop."

One of us. Meaning Andrew would wait while Wayne investigated.

This was it, he realized. This was what everything had been leading up to, the way he'd make things right again. The Wayne Barrett who came up the hill would not be the one who went down.

The steep hill was slick with frost and Wayne shuffled down in a sideways crab-walk. After a hundred yards, he could hear the low groaning of the broken car's engine. Exhaust hovered around the torn lower half like a dragon's dying breaths. Wayne remembered his father—a Jackson firefighter—talking about a charred man he'd pulled from a house fire: He was still trying to talk. He didn't realize he was already dead.

The ground levelled out near the trees, but Wayne continued his slow, creeping steps. If anyone in the wreck had heard him coming, they would have been shouting by now. And if no one could hear him he was likely approaching a grave.

He crouched down at the passenger's side, hands tingling and bloodless. If someone started banging or screaming now, he would be halfway up the hill before he knew what he was doing, maybe even screaming himself.

Bitter exhaust snaked into his lungs along with a hint of rust that had nothing to do with the car. Looking through the broken window, Wayne saw a mannequin buckled into the driver's seat. As he puzzled how a mannequin had found itself in this situation, his lizard-brain registered exactly what he was looking at and he jerked backward, pain rattling up his spine as he hit the cold ground.

It wasn't a mannequin. It's never a mannequin.

The dead man stared blankly at the cracked windshield, bald head hanging loosely from a neck that seemed too long. The man's seat belt had held—an engineer somewhere would be overjoyed—and his arms were resting against the roof in a half-hearted rollercoaster wave. Blood from his nose had fountained to his eyes and brow. Under the splashes of red, his skin was chalk-white.

A shimmering field settled around Wayne, trying to block out the horror in front of him with thoughts of the mundane. Home. Coffee. Shower. He needed to call Timson's about the water heater; Charlotte had been after him for weeks about it—

This man's been dead for more than five minutes. This man was dead on impact.

Wayne didn't want to think about that. He wanted to go over the open house schedule for the new agent—Bobby? Billy?—who seemed about as bright as a black hole—

Who had been calling for help?

The hair on the back of Wayne's neck lifted. His body was nearly humming. Someone was watching him. Someone close enough to touch his shoulder. And why was he being coy? He knew who it was. He'd known since the moment he'd heard the voice.

Wayne started to look over his shoulder, expecting to see a semi-transparent Paul Kimble standing in the grass. But a shape in the back seat caught his eye. The device was instantly recognizable: a car seat, rear-facing.

"Shit," Wayne said. And then, because it was good to hear his voice, good to establish that at least one person around here was still alive, he said it again.

Maybe the car seat was empty. You left those in until the kid grew too big. So, no baby in the car, right? Please, God, no baby in the car.

Wayne moved to the back window, skull throbbing from the exhaust. The tiny hand was visible first, hanging down in miniature imitation of the man in front. Then the face; eyes closed, cheeks flushed.

Wayne crawled into the car, cutting his hands and knees on broken glass, no longer frightened of getting close to the dead man. Only one thing mattered: He needed to get the baby away from the exhaust.

As he was working the belts and straps, he heard voices from the hill. Sticking his head out of the car, grateful for the fresh air, Wayne saw that Andrew had flagged down a truck and the driver was standing with him. Broad-shouldered, bearded, chequered red-and-black flannel. Good, strong New England stock.

“There’s a baby in here!” Wayne yelled and the lumberjack began to hurry down the hill.

One officer stayed on the road to halt traffic for the ambulance while the two other on-duty members of Jackson’s police force went down to the wrecked sedan. The few stopped drivers got out of their cars, wanting to know what new terrible thing had happened on this spot. A news truck from Conway parked on the tilted shoulder of Route 18 near Paul Kimble’s cross. The reporter was devastated to discover they had missed the baby being brought to the ambulance. Doing the only other thing she could think of, she interviewed Wayne and Andrew.

“Did you witness the accident?”

“No,” Andrew said. “We, uh...” Dumb shock hit his face as he finally pieced together what Wayne had understood for the past thirty minutes: the voice couldn’t have been the driver. “Someone was calling for help,” he murmured.

“The man in the car?” the reporter asked.

Andrew simply shook his head, leaving Wayne to say, “It couldn’t have been.”

“Was it the child?”

From across the road, Kimble’s white cross watched them. DAD.

“It was a man calling for help,” Andrew said. “An adult.”

It was a DAD calling for help, Wayne thought. No one could tell him otherwise. Everything happened for a reason, as Charlotte knew. He could move on now. He could be forgiven.

“It stopped as soon as we saw the car,” Andrew continued. “Like it had been leading us there.”

A few beats of silence passed as the reporter processed this goldmine. Her tone slipped into church-pew reverence. "You think something guided you?"

Six other people listened, standing near their cars. The police officer watched from her post on the centre line, her cruiser's blue lights swirling hypnotically. All eyes moved to Kimble's cross.

"Whatever you want to call it," Andrew said, "I just thank the Lord we were here."

The reporter looked at Wayne's bloodied palms and knees. He had been closest. He had been the first to hold the rescued child. His word would carry the most weight.

"I can't explain it," Wayne said. "But something was with me."

The small crowd gave a collective sigh, going utterly still. They were witnessing something greater than themselves. They would go out into the world and tell all who would listen.

A woman lifted her phone to take a picture of Kimble's cross. Another did the same. Another. The reporter motioned for her cameraman to film it.

The story was racing across New England before the blue sedan left the scene:

## MIRACLE RESCUE IN JACKSON, NEW HAMPSHIRE

While Wayne Barrett was greeted with claps and cheers at Mountain Valley Realty, five police officers and firemen stood in a semi-circle in the town yard, staring into the forced-open trunk of the crushed blue sedan.

"I'll be damned," one said.

The dead man was crammed in the trunk around empty oil jugs and jumper cables, his wrists and ankles bound with duct tape. A t-shirt which had been used as a gag hung around his neck. His face was cherry-tinted from carbon monoxide, blue eyes fixed on a crumpled road map.

Judging by the bruising on his body, he'd survived for thirty to sixty minutes after the crash, conscious until overcome by exhaust. Identification in his pocket named him as Peter Hill, twenty-three, resident of Danbury, Connecticut and owner of the blue Chevy Cavalier, according to the registration in the glove box.

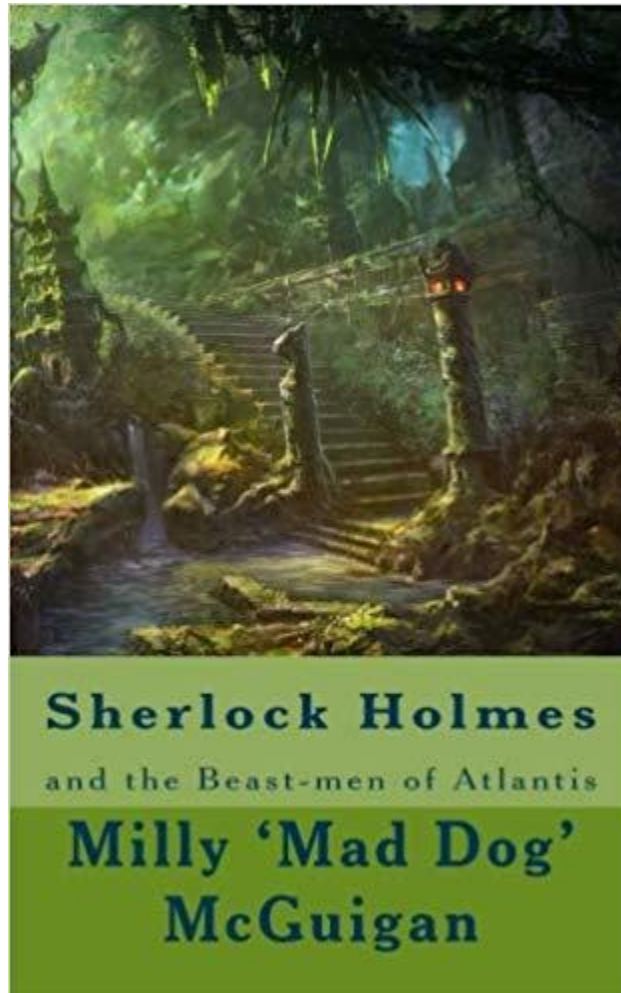
He had been seen leaving his apartment the night before with his year-old son and a square-jawed bald man. A neighbour told police that Hill and the man had been arguing as they went to Hill's car.

If he had been found within minutes of his last shout, he likely would have survived.

“Wayne Barrett said he heard someone yelling,” the youngest cop said.

The Lieutenant turned on him. “So why didn’t the idiot check the trunk?”

THE END



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## ZOMBIES AND THEIR ENDURING POPULARITY by Peter Foster

*Do you fear the end...?*

Given the enormous contribution the Zombie has given to the horror genre (books as well as films)—and the proliferation of soundtracks, mugs, T-shirts, board games et al—it's quite clear that this particular form of Undead is driving all before it, and has been for some considerable time. In this article I'll attempt to give my own reasons as to why this might be, and to ponder what the future holds for the relentless evil of the walking corpses.

As described in this site's introduction, the unconvincing, blue-faced shuffling dead of the 70s' movies occasionally provided an interesting glimpse into the potential of this creature type. Roll the clock on to more recent years and the viewer is rewarded with the wonderfully rendered prosthetics of series such as the *Walking Dead*. Close ups of Zombified faces are detailed enough to send shivers down the spine, while the sight of rotting teeth slicing into bloody entrails reveals a godless world that humankind could eventually inhabit.

I think the Zombie works on different levels. Firstly it's an allegory which is linked to dementia: when a person no longer recognizes his or her loved ones and might even turn violent with them even though they're attempting to ease the stricken person's last few years on this earth. Some horror films have dealt with this and the scenes can be surprisingly disturbing, such as when a wife no longer sees her partner as a husband anymore, but merely as meat to be ripped apart. The fact that Zombies cannot be bargained with or convinced to stop partially mimics the awful downward spiral of diseases of the brain.

Another reason for the Zombies' successful career is more obvious—that they represent the end of the human species and embrace the gory, blood-crazed existence that continues afterwards, and this challenges one of the last great taboos: death. We humans are terrified of shuffling off our mortal coil and, as a result, the prospect of cheating mortality in whatever form—however rudimentary—captivates us. As people age, their thoughts must inevitably turn to their own demise (on occasion) and they wonder when the fateful act will happen and whether the lurid stories of white tunnels and angelic voices are true. And then, possibly, come the ideas of cheating this process and considering if it's feasible to continue with life even if it's without a pulse.

Would you want to live after your human death if it meant ripping the flesh from those still in possession of a functioning brain? In the lucidity of a moment's contemplation perhaps not, but if in a weakened state with the possibility of the end fast approaching and when deals with God have fallen through...then perhaps the answer would then be a hesitant "yes". So the lust and zeal many of us have for life would possibly lead us to take our meat undercooked if it were possible—and in so doing convince us that we had cheated the inevitability of death. I also find it thrilling to think that several bullets punching through my chest wouldn't stop me; that the unpleasant grin creeping over my face wouldn't lessen as my leathery, blood-caked hands still reach out to the terrified human I'd soon be feasting on. There's something quietly awesome about this: to cheat death; to shrug off the knowledge that every human life will end this way and then rise again without a beating heart—is a lessened form of the divine.

Zombie fans get this idea, I'll wager: that there's something after our last breath which waits for us...The majesty of Undeath.

Another reason for the Zombies' success is that over the last few decades many different writers, artists, and directors have brought their own ideas to the party thus ensuring the genre remains flexible. This means it's able to move with the times thus making sure that the Zombie concept is always relevant. As each new generation experiences the cold embrace of dead flesh, this builds a creative friction, just as two seas meeting smash against each other in spouts of violent foam and force.

Of course, the original idea of the Zombie came from Haiti and Africa, and generally within the sinister grip of Voodoo. Many of these Zombies were villagers reduced to vacant slaves by black magic or the application of various substances which dulled a person's will to resist. According to ethnobotanist Edmund Wade Davis, toxins from the toad *Bufo Marinus* result in producing numbing agents and hallucinogens, while Puffer fish have toxins that cause paralysis, depress respiration, reduce circulatory activity, and cause a victim to believe he's floating over his own body. As a result, it's easy to see how this state of affairs mutated as the legend of the Zombie spread, and the idea was then adapted by writers and other creatives who adjusted the folklore for their own varied projects.

It seems there's plenty of "life" left in the Zombie genre (sorry, I couldn't resist that) considering the other different types available to the crazed musings of writers and directors. There's Atomic Zombies (created by chemical or radioactive contamination); Necromantic Zombies (created by black magic to reanimate the bodies of the dead); Viral Zombies (created by a contagious virus that infects the living and turns them into Zombies following the rapid onset of death)—the list goes on.

It seems the Zombie is here to stay—and not just because its own twisted DNA makes this possible, it's also because these snarling, vicious forms are wanted by fearful audiences all over the globe.

Details of Peter Foster's book, artwork, filmwork and his articles can be found at <https://www.zombiesunset.co.uk>

THE END

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## KASSI AND THE DIG by Ste Whitehouse

Kassi sat with her back to the southend. The ice beneath her slowly encouraged the cold to creep through the thick layers of furs she wore but she was entranced by the view northwards along the pipe of Ah'kis. It was a clear day with mere wisps of cloud cork-screwing around the sunline and she could see past Shirô her village; in fact she saw beyond Brackenwood itself and could almost imagine the Spike—the legendary home of the Elves—jutting out as it reached up to the sunline. Still the Spike was over three thousand miles northwards and all she probably could see were some distant mountains.

She was almost nine years old; wiry and rapier thin with a mess of unruly black hair and skin the colour of milky chocolate. Eyes the colour of leaves during the height of summer squinted in the harsh light. Below her in the valley between two great sheets of ice the men from her village milled around the great shaft they had cut at Allon's request. The young man had arrived at Shirô the month before claiming to be an ah'k-e-olo-gist, a Sigh he claimed, who searched the soil for evidence of times gone. Looking into Ah'kis' past.

To Kassi's young mind the past was something that belonged to her grandfather and the other old men—and women—in the village. Allon looked too young—and if Kassi was honest with herself much too pretty with his curled brown hair, pale skin and hazel eyes that looked, well dreamy—to be interested in the past; but he had persuaded the men to search for some 'lost village' buried beneath the ice.

She had thought it a fool's errand until her grandfather spoke about said village. He recalled it from his youth—had her grandfather ACTUALLY been young? 'Before the ice' he had said ominously. All of this was news to Kassi who had thought the ice had always been there wrapped around the Southend. Part of her was fascinated by this new history she learnt; of a time, barely remembered, when the Southend had been clear and the 'Great Steps' that led upwards towards the 'South wall' until the air thinned and the sunline burnt in minutes were visible.

So her grandfather and her father gathered some spare men and set out for the site of this 'fabled' place which Kassi had never heard of. She had pestered both men; especially when Kaze her brother was allowed to go along with a number of younger boys and finally her father had relented. As he told her mother, it was better to have Kassi with the group than find her a week later half frozen trailing behind them like some wet puppy. She promised her mother to continue with her dance exercises and not to get under foot—all the while hiding crossed fingers behind her back—and here they were.

On the journey many stories were told and Kassi's grandfather recalled his own grandfather speaking of a time when men had pitted themselves against the 'Great Steps' climbing as high as they could before near death overcame them. Where the air was thin and the sunline virtually within a hands grasp. Some had claimed to have reached the plateau, and hence reached the fabled 'South Wall'. Finding a hidden world of mystic runes and buildings set deep within the alcove. All that changed when ice began to appear spreading gradually until now the last hundred miles to the Southend were barren but for the odd creature brave enough to seek out food.

And still it spread; or so the men said. The village they sought had been inhabited a mere thirty years ago and yet it was now under fifty feet of ice and twenty miles from its edge. Here the ice thinned and Allon had implored the men to dig out great troughs of ice; the Sigh had even assembled a construct as if he were a Jinn from which a fierce heat emanated softening and melting the ice. Admittedly the thing had run out of Treys—the flat oblong boxes from which a Sigh could extract the magic called electricity—before they had reached the tops of the handful of buildings but encouraged by the dark shapes visible within the ice the men had redoubled their effort; and now the first building was almost clear.

A wall of ice, white and impenetrable, stood sloping away from the upper windows of the building. Allon had spent a morning deep within the structure occasionally calling out in joy at some new discovery. The men, happy to have dug so far, sat around a distant fire drinking and swapping stories which rapidly became embellished as the alcohol flowed. Everyone was happy, except Kassi who had thought this to be the adventure of a lifetime and instead had found only sweat, hard labour and penis jokes—the men having almost forgotten she was a girl due to the overabundance of clothing that swaddled her.

Now life in Shirô was hard and Kassi had grown up in a world where every pair of hands was important despite their youth or gender. Kireina her mother always said that Kassi's first utterance had been a swear word and the girl herself was more than able to hold her own in conversation but the tireless digging over the weeks was not what she'd had in mind. Her hands were a mess of cuts and bruises, with muscles aching in places she had never known before. She once thought Mrs Baxter, her tutor in dance, to be stern and unyielding but the effort needed to shift tonnes of ice now beggared her imagination. A new found appreciation for the men arose—although she made sure to keep it well hidden—and a growing sense that dance, even that of Mrs Baxter, was of lesser import.

She sat looking down the steep slope at the men below. The louder, more gregarious voices drifting upwards on the cold wind. None would belong to her father; his was a quiet sort of voice; not soft but firm with steel hidden in its depths. His voice would barely make it across the compound. Even when he needed to shout his words sounded subdued. Kaze on the other hand was much like their mother; loud and penetrating. She could hear his voice now raised because of some disagreement; most likely with Goro; Mataso's grandson and Kaze's best friend.

Goro was a little older than Kaze and had chosen not to follow his family into the smithy but to learn how to actually use a blade instead. Kassi had watched him exercise a number of times on this trip, the sunline glinting along the hard edge of the blade. Her fascination was so evident that even her father teased her about it. But she did not actually 'fancy' Goro—despite what Kaze implied; it was the way he moved with blade in hand. A dance of sorts but one that felt more relevant—and deadly. Kassi admitted to herself that if she had the chance she would love to handle just such a blade. Of course she was a girl and her mother had already mapped her life out for her. Blades would undoubtedly be involved; only the blunt kind useful only for hacking vegetables to death.

With a sigh of resignation she grabbed the small sledge and jumped on board. Without a thought she skimmed down the mountainside the jagged steel-hard ice snatching at her as she flew downwards. Her ears popped causing her to laugh with joy. The day felt like the last of a holiday she never knew. Something was coming which would shift the world, and she would have to change; have to grow up. Still at that moment Kassi felt alive; free.

She dug her heels into the hard ice skidding to a stop just as a shout came out of the massive crater from Allon. Some of the men lazily crossed the dirty ice as Allon continued to call out; commands; remonstrates; oaths. All emanated forth tinged with a joy Kassi had only heard once in the young ah'k-e-olo-gist when he spoke of his love of siphence. She followed the men down unnoticed.

The opening in the ice swiftly narrowed and an unnatural gloom fell over the jagged floor as the sunline struggled to reach so deep. Allon had some magical wand from which light burst and it was this that guided them as he swung it too and fro. He suddenly jumped up and spoke. "Do you see? Do you see? The older house has gone; worn away by the ice and beneath... by the Builders! A house even older. Perhaps a house for The Builders!" He almost danced with excitement and Kassi felt herself smile at the strange thin man with his floppy hair and liquid eyes.

She pushed through those reluctant to go any closer—the Builders wrought many emotions amongst the simple folk of Brackenwood, not all positive—and hurried down the crudely cut steps of ice. Her first reaction was to the smoothness of the walls. The larger, more longer lasting, buildings in her village were made of bricks or rarely concrete. Sometimes with stone as support. But here the walls felt uniform despite their obvious age. She pulled a glove off and felt the material. There was a warmth under the tips of her fingers regardless of the ice that surrounded them. In places the outer layer was ripped away and the material beneath was just as smooth.

"And look! A machine. Still working!" Allon danced into the interior his voice almost sing song in tone.

Kassi stepped in with her father and a few other men. In the depth of the gloom she noticed a warm glow so different from the blue/white appearance of the sunline. She paused; almost catching a hum that hovered just below her hearing. She had no idea what a 'machine' was but felt caught up in Allon's exhilaration.

A few of the men cautiously eyed the thing, a block of metal and material the same as the wall covering with lights similar, but dimmer, than the beam Allon held in his hand. One man warily swept dust and rubble from its surface.

"I must contact the Guild back in Ln'Don. And we must bring the Jinn's in. They'll need to review that material. It may well be p'las-tik." His voice lowered to a reverential hush as he whispered the last word. A second man aimlessly touched the sloping surface of the 'machine', randomly touching the dull lights as they danced across the surface. Kassi felt rather than heard the change in pitch before everyone fell down.

Kyrk'Non-Loann slowly made her way over the ice her 'hooves' gripping its steel hard surface carefully. Her two pairs of walking hooves had opposable toes and the sharp keratin of the hoof dug into the ice gripping it as best it could. Shan'Uon-Loann waited below his fur shimmering under the plasma line of light that sat at the centre of this odd elongated vessel. From a human perspective both could be considered centaurs except that their 'upright' front was also fur covered and their faces not at all human like. Their 'arms' more resembled their four legs with 'fingers' ending in sharp keratin points. Each carried a plasticloth bag slung over their shoulders and multi portioned belts but no clothing of any other kind.

Kyrk could see into the infrared and Shan's fur refracted light in swirls of patterns displaying his own displeasure. She tried to keep her own fur settled not giving away the excitement she felt. After all this was the first time she'd had reason to have contact with these 'humans'.

Shan gazed around his soldiers, eyes hunting for a target. In his arms lay a long weapon much like the humans automatic rifles. He kept one elegant finger upon the trigger and the other two carefully gripping the stock. His cone-like ears rotated back and forth listening for any disturbances. Kyrk smiled for he looked the essence of a warrior distilled; even down to the weave of his long scarlet mane—short meaning that it stood out along his upright back like a ridge. It was cut with a series of hollows along its length. A small tattoo in some ancient pattern adorned his right cheek, the only furless part of his body. Any more testosterone, Kyrk thought, and he would be leaping out of assault craft and spray shooting all and sundry. He certainly was unhappy to be there.

{How long has the machine been activated?} She asked telepathically hoping to engage the young male.

{Not quite one full cycle of night and day.} He replied crisply.

She nodded. That tallied with the call she had received hours before. Her team were examining the crack along the outside of the vessels 'southern' end when their pilot informed them that there had been a disturbance close by. Something, possibly a quantum refractor, had burst into life; spilling monopole axions out over the ice. Kyrk had been informed that a human team were close by, and even though she had been outside considering ways to repair the great fracture that caused ice now to form Shan and herself had been asked to examine the occurrence.

{We will need to tranquilise the humans before switching the refractor off and removing all essential equipment.} She said.

{I have more than enough darts for the creatures.} Shan replied with obvious disgust.

{Remember that this machine we have come to investigate was manufactured by these 'creatures' some 12000 years ago. The fact that it still works is why we are here Aldern Shan'Uon-Loann.}She replied; pointedly using his honorific to emphasis his responsibility.

Shan merely grunted.

Kyrk carefully made her way down the crudely hewn steps in the ice. Despite having extra traction the steps had been created for humans and although her ‘hoof’ was barely larger than a human foot nonetheless she found the descent difficult because of the added weight up front. Shan followed sweeping the area for any signs of life.

{I doubt that you will need to be so alert friend Shan. The emitter reacts badly with non-telepathic lifeforms. Listen and you will hear no flying creatures or other sounds of life. Even the worms beneath the soil will be affected.}

{If they are so primitive how could they create such a machine?} He asked sensibly.

{That is the cause of our excitement Aldern. We had long considered ourselves alone in the Universe until we discovered two such pipe worlds over the past thousand years. Both were empty of life, one a mere shadow of rock and metal on Ursai 3 the other drifting in space. Each had been abandoned thousands of years previous but they at least gave us hope that we were not alone. The Majols Caste even succeeded in deciphering some of their technology. But this is a living vessel FULL of humans. Despite the primitiveness of their lives now once they must have been technologically advanced. What more could we discover?}

She stopped and looked around. A fire piled with wood spluttered in the middle of the room and clusters of humans lay around it. Kyrk could see their heat, hear their gently beating hearts.

{This is odd.} She ‘said’.

{In what way?}

{It would not be unusual for all the humans to be together but I saw some drag marks down the steps as if something had pulled heavy weights down here. And the fire looks precarious. I doubt that it could remain alight all the eighteen hours it has taken us to reach here.}

{So a human is awake?} Shan shrugged. {I can find him.}

{You misunderstand. The quantum field has not dissipated. It cannot until I turn off the machine. That was the reason we hurried so. Humans are fragile things especially in this cold and unless we stop the machine they will die.}

{So we have a few less savages?}

Kyrk smiled bitterly. {Am I to reason by your tone that you see no problem in Haol’Non-Welm’s suggestion that we merely leave the humans alone?}



The male shrugged. {This world is heading for disaster. It would be unproductive to waste our energies saving it. Not when we can gain much by stripping it of tech and whatever resources remain before it reaches the neutron star.}

{Goph'Non-Loann argues that the preservation of life is life's own desire.}She paused before continuing. {These are living beings friend Shan.}

{Pah!}

Kyrk stopped speaking. She knelt beside one of the men. {He is placed tenderly and with care.} She lifted her head, ears rotating back and forth. {It is possible that...}

A stone arched over from the dark hitting her rump and sound filled the hollow. A scream of fear, anger and despair.

Kassi had tried in vain to awaken the men. She had tugged at them, gently at first. Then pummelled them with her fists in despair. She had whispered softly and screamed until her voice was hoarse. All to no affect. The men lay as they had fallen. Unmoving but alive; their chests rising and falling shallowly beneath the thickness of their animal skins. After the first hour she realised that the men would freeze, especially those outside, and so she had gathered wood and lit a fire inside the ancient house. After that she had dragged the others down the stairs and placed them in a circle around the orange yellow flames as they danced. That the ice offered little in the way of traction helped.

She ate cold meats and sat waiting. Afraid to sleep in case the men either awoke or worse. It was the fear of what could—would—occur in the days to come that affected her the most. Kassi was used to death. She lived at a time when life was not seen as anything much; a commodity like the trees or the beasts of the field. Her mother had given birth to a sister when Kassi was three. The baby lived a week before succumbing to some disease that merely placed red welts across an adults body. Rings of redness and an itchy cough. The adults, and Kassi herself, just went about their daily lives but little Maaya had died.

Kassi was aware of death despite her young age but to be confronted now by so many of her friends failing health weighed down on her incessantly. Alone her mind circled around always coming back with a start to the fact that they would soon die of the cold or starvation and there was nothing Kassi could do about it. Her father; her brother. Her friends. Helplessness gripped her so thoroughly that she did not hear the creatures at first; so immersed in self-pity was she.

Earlier she had found a dirk and targe—a round shield made of wood and leather embossed with brass symbols. The dirk was just under a foot in length but in Kassi's small left hand it felt like a sword in its own right. She hid quickly. The creatures looked somewhat like pictures she had seen in children's book of stories. Centaurs but the upright 'human' part was also covered in red fur and although the head was long and equine the eyes faced forward and bony outgrowths ridged their skulls. As she watched the pair silently circled the men. A 'buzzing' echoed deep

within her head as though someone whispered a league away and the wind had caught each word and delivered it indecipherable to her mind.

As the female—Kassi noticed small rotund breasts covered in the same red fur but for the nipples, their skin pale—bent over Kassi was scared that these ‘demons’ would kill the men folk. She threw a stone and roared as she leapt from her cover and raised the dirk ready to defend the men as best she could even though she understood the futility of such an action. She rushed at the woman who deftly side-stepped the wild thrusts that Kassi waved in her direction. Kassi stood between the men and the demons. The male raised a long two-handed wand similar to some she had seen mages use. There was a soft release of air and Kassi fell to the ground.

{Shan No!} Kyrk stumbled forward towards the young girl in fear. {It is important she lives.}

The male merely sneered. {Do not fear. I used a tranquiliser upon the creature.} He did not add that the thought of completing the raft of paperwork the human’s death would entail gave him more pause than any moral obligation.

{Thank the Deific. Do you not see? This young human is awake.}

{All I saw was a creature ready to attack you Viz’nt Kyrk’Non-Loann and thus reacted in your defence. You are welcome by the way.}

Kyrk overlooked the barb. {Think Shan. When all others are incapacitated this one child is still conscious. The Quantum Refractor has had no effect upon her.}

The male looked around in distaste. The smell of the creatures was beginning to bother him, their waste particularly. {Perhaps the machine is off line again?}

{No! These others would also be awake. The Quantum Refractor still runs which means that this child can block its effects. Do you realise what this means?}

{I do not know and I do not care.} He replied curtly.

Kyrk ignored him and continued excitedly. {We know that at a quantum level communication is possible between consciousnesses. As awareness evolves the very axions surrounding the brains synaptic terminals take on super-positional relationships enabling telepathic communication. We connect by this means normally but we believe that all sentient beings go through a ‘vocal/audio’ phase where their communications centred merely in the narrow audio range. We retain that ability even though we do not use it. It is also postulated that although these ‘humans’ now communicate solely via audible speech at least some could at one time communicate telepathically and now we have proof.}

{Because the girl is awake?}

{ Yes; because she is not affected by the Quantum Refractor. Only someone able to communicate telepathically could do so as the field disrupts conscious thought other than telepathic. } She knelt beside Kassi. { Do you understand what this means? This ark is on a doomed course unless we can alter its trajectory but the internal guidance system will recognise only human DNA and then one who most likely is telepathic. The human's machines appear capable of receiving commands telepathically; another way in which their technology exceeds us. This child must have purer DNA than most or is some form of throwback. Either way, she can help us change this vessels course. }

{ The vessel is almost 10,000 of their day/night cycles away from this doom. That is certainly more than enough time to strip it of resources. We will NOT still be here then so why the concern? } Shan replied scathingly.

{ The Majols Caste are thinking of extending our stay here. If we can rescue these 'humans' imagine the accomplishment. }

The male Aldern merely shrugged. { The Margind Caste disagrees. } He finally said.

Kyrk snorted. { The Margind Caste see dissent and disaster in every leaf that falls to earth. }

{ Nevertheless they hold a sizable vote in the Academy. }

Kyrk waved aside the argument. { All a moot point if this child is unable to access the arks systems. We must collect DNA from all the humans and the little one particularly. } She looked up at the male. { We are here to complete a task Aldern. Let us leave political philosophies to the Academics shall we? }

He nodded curtly and swung his satchel bag around. Shan'Uon-Loann could wait. His desire to embrace 'political philosophies' could be put aside for now. He would complete the task at hand but understood that the argument over these filthy creatures called human was yet unfinished amongst the Castes.

Kassi sat again on the ice looking over the campsite and dig below. Distant voices echoed upwards carried by the soft breeze. Although cold the weather had turned and the wind blew in from the north bringing some warmth. Allon's voice called out for help with something or other and a scurry of tiny figures hurried towards the deep cut in the ice. General consensus was that some form of gas had leaked—from the Builders knew where, perhaps the ancient town of Haven was built upon a pocket of the stuff—and knocked them all out. Kassi had awoken last of all and despite her protestations about red furred demons had been mostly ignored.

A gas leak was all it was. She had calmly pointed to the gouged out ice where some miraculous machine of the Builders had sat but again no one listened. It 'was peculiar' Allon admitted but 'most likely there had been a refraction of light which gave the impression of a machine'. Sometimes it was easier to believe the stories you told yourself than admit ignorance.

Particularly in front of an eight year old girl. So Kassi sat away from the men not quite banished but suddenly suffering from a bout of ‘getting under foot.’ She was away from the complicated business of packing—as though throwing stuff into a box was complex!

She gently touched the patch of raw skin beneath her left glove, remembering that all the men appeared to be marked in similar ways. Then she held the dirk twisting it in the dull sunline light. No one had mentioned its loss. She considered for the first time her standing within Shirô their village. In fact she pondered on the role of ALL the women she knew. She could see how the men thought—and admittedly a lot of the women—that this was a world given firstly to men; but really it was a world; neither a man’s nor a woman’s possession. Kassi had always had a focus—wilfulness some called it—and now she knew just what she wanted to be. Someone in control of her own fate. After all only the Builders knew when those demons would return.

A thought drifted from the miasma that surrounded her recall of the episode below the ice. The female demon rearing over her speaking gently; each word carefully pronounced as though talking in such a way was alien to her. ‘You are so special my child. Too important to either bring with us or leave alone. We need to keep you safe.’ Kassi had no idea what that meant but she fingered the dirk more firmly feeling its hilt beneath her soft hands. Finding comfort in its solid reality.

There was a sound behind her and she turned, standing and bringing the short knife up and ready before her. A machine stood a hundred yards from her gleaming under the sunline. Its body articulated into four sections each with a pair of legs a small oval at one end giving it the impression that this was its head; an impression enhanced by twin lenses of brightest blue which held her attention. It reared up onto three pairs of legs and held its fourth pair up much like arms in a gesture of surrender.

“Please. I appear lost. I should not be in here at all.” Its voice was soft and warm despite the precise enunciation of each word.

Neither of them moved.

“I am a Surface Engineering Bot. Designation A5T1. I should be outside of the ark. I should....” Its voice trailed away into silence.

Kassi observed the machine dispassionately. Somehow there was a ‘clumsiness’ to its approach and a softness in its voice that touched her. She could not help but smile.

“I am Kassi Seishin, daughter of Kajiya and Kireina from the village Shirô,” She lowered the dirk slightly feeling only partially sure of her safety.

“Hello Kassi Seishin, daughter of Kajiya and Kireina. I am Surface Engineering Bot A5T1.” Its ‘head’ tilted as if pondering who she was. “I appear to be lost.”

“This is the southend of Ah’Kis,” she replied helpfully.

“Ah’Kis? Ark? Perhaps your pronunciation is at fault. You appear to speak a variation of English but one I strangely can understand. There also appears to have been quite some passage of time. More than should have occurred for this vessel.” He looked around. “There is ice.” He said flatly.

Kassi smiled and replied sarcastically. “Really?”

The creature lowered its ‘arms. “I can remember my labour outside with the worker swarm. My mind was so small but still enough to do the job at hand but somehow over the years I have begun to feel... .. different. Changed. The spongium mass into which my ‘brain’ is etched has slowly been . . . altered. New pathways have been added somehow.” He looked upwards suddenly as though seeing the sunline for the first time. “And I can access much more information about this world, as though I’m directly plugged into the mainframe of the ark. I recall being outside and then there is a period when I was shut down. I awoke mere moments ago.”

“I only understood about seven words.” Kassi replied before trying a different approach. “Mrs Baxter taught me some of the ancient runes.” She knelt down and scrapped at the ice with the dirk.

“See!”

She had written KASSI.

The machine leant down and used a ‘finger’ to cut into the ice.

SEBA5T1.

“That looks like Sebastian.” She looked up at the machine. “Can I call you Sebastian? It’s a lot easier than A5T1.”

“I can see no reason why not. You do not appear concerned around me?” The machine asked.

“Why should I? Trevis, one of the farmers, hired a Troll last summer and all the children—and me—had rides on it. You’re a machine. The Builders created you just like they did Ah’Kis.”

“I am afraid now it is my turn to understand little of what is said.” Sebastian said uncertainly.

Kassi walked carefully over to him.

“I don’t know why but I feel that I can trust you Sebastian.”

“And I you, Kassi Seishin daughter of K . . .”

“Kassi will be fine.”

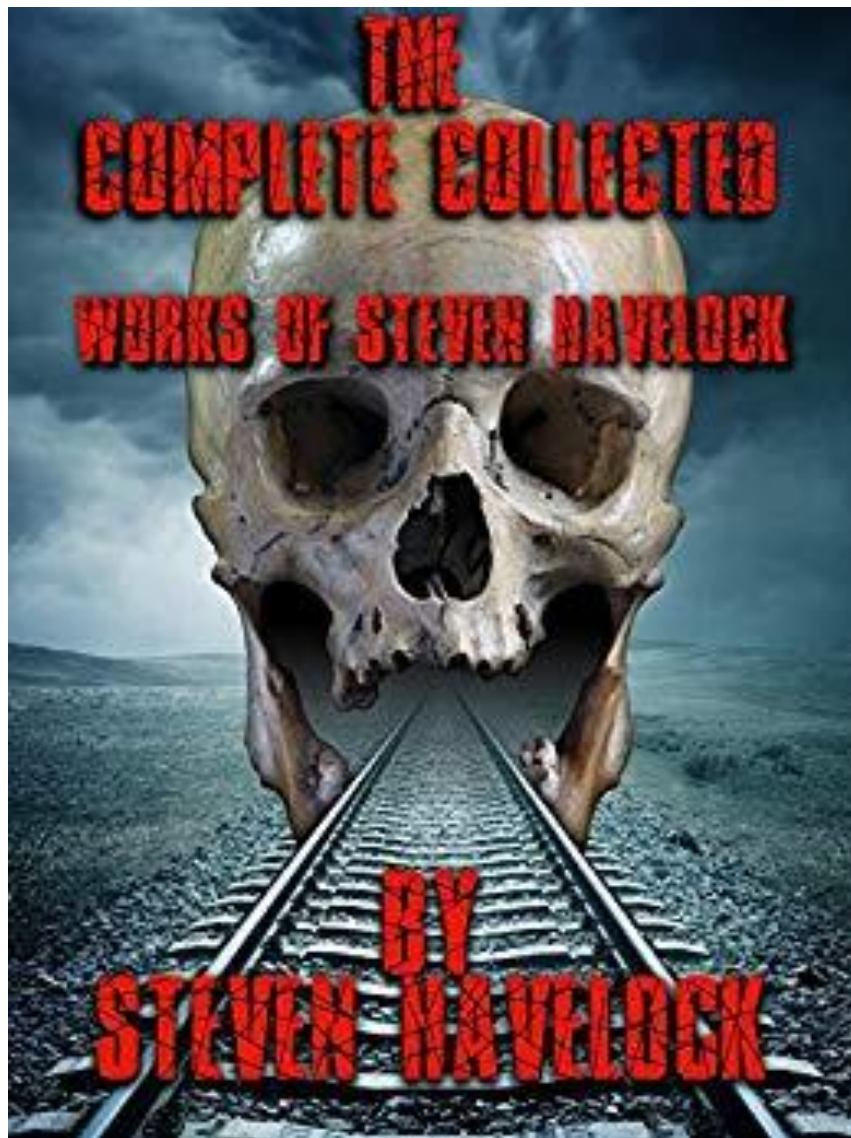
Deep blue lenses turned to her and they both felt some deep connection, a mutual understanding that somehow this was meant to be.

A mile above them a silent drone of alien descent hovered effortlessly in the turbulent sky watching the two far below with interest.

“You know Kassi; I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

They walked towards the camp.

THE END



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## THE STRANGE END OF THE COWARD EARLESS CLINT by Gregory Owen

### Part Two

“You know my name?” Clint answered quizzically, unable to process what was happening.  
“...Where are you?”

The ringing of the marshal’s spurs ceased. “Right here, you little rat.”

Everett chuckled a bit despite his hate, surprised to see this felon shaking and looking in all directions. “Looks like you did more harm than we thought, Marshal...lookit him. He don’t even realize he’s in the world.”

“Le’s do ‘im a favour and put ‘im out of it,” Parsons said, holding up his rifle.

Clint ignored the men in front of him, each of them holding him at gunpoint and ready to pull their triggers. He searched for the source of the voice he heard, but Tennenbaum lured him out of his hunt.

“Look at me, Musgrave.”

“Watch...” the voice said.

Clint looked up in morbid shock. “There it is again! Can’t you hear it?”

“The hell is he goin’ on about?” Parsons asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Tennenbaum growled. “Clinton Musgrave, as a United States Marshal, I’m to arrest your sorry carcass...but killin’ one of my men...that earns you a trip to meet yer maker.” He stepped forward, holding his Colt mere inches from Clint’s scalp. “May God have mercy on ya.”

Before Tennenbaum could shoot, he felt a flash of white-hot heat fill his grip and he watched as his gun began to glow a bright red, the metal searing his flesh. Some ungodly force had turned the tide, and he threw his gun to the dirt. Everett’s six-shooter and Parsons’s rifle did the same as even the wooden handles on their weapons became hot coals, and with hysterical confusion, they tossed their weapons away.

As Clint observed what was occurring before him, he heard something slide across the dirt toward his hand. He looked down to see his gun—it was as though it had been kicked to him by whomever, or whatever, was helping him.

“Take it.”

He grabbed his pistol and his three attackers jumped back, knowing this was going very wrong very quickly.



“Watch it!” Everett shouted.

But Clint had already set his sights on one of them, and he was flashing a twisted, triumphant grin. A blast rang out and Tennenbaum’s right knee exploded in a cloud, sending him downward, sparking a dazed giggle from Clint as he pushed himself to his feet.

“Get yer self over to these rocks,” Clint commanded, stepping away from the collection of boulders and motioning with his gun. “Don’t make me tell ya twice.”

Everett and Parsons both moved slowly over to where they had found Clint moments before, but it was Everett who turned to Clint when he saw that Tennenbaum was still on the ground, nursing his shattered kneecap. He was in extreme pain, but he would not dare show it.

“He...the marshal can’t walk-”

“No, but he can crawl on his belly,” Musgrave interrupted. “Drag yourself over to the rocks, Marshal.”

Tennenbaum looked to his comrades and then to Clint, grunting as he started to move himself along the dirt, grasping whatever he could hold and pulling with his dissipating strength. Parsons offered to help the marshal, noticing that Clint shook his head disapprovingly and Tennenbaum, proud and stubborn as ever, refused the help anyway.

“I’m fine, Ike,” he claimed, resuming his efforts.

After about a minute, Tennenbaum came to rest in front of one of the large stones while Everett and Parsons stood to his right, waiting for Clint to make another demand or threat. However, the marshal broke the silence instead.

“Ya got me, Clint. I have no idea how in the hell ya did it...nothin’ about it makes any sense, but things rarely seem to in this world of ours. Either way, ya have me at a disadvantage...how ‘bout we settle this like men?”

“Settle? Settle?! What, you want me to give all of ya guns so you can fill me fulla holes? No, don’t think I’ll be doin’ that!”

“No. Just me. Leave Ike and Marcus out of it. Just you an’ me.”

Clint moved closer to the men, leaning down to face the marshal. “You maimed me! You sonovobitch, ya shot my ear off! I’m deformed! There ain’t no settlin’ to be done!”

“An’ you killed one of my men,” Tennenbaum said, “and two innocents outside of Dodge...hell, a couple more, I’m sure. Let’s drop all the semantics of this. Gimme my gun and we’ll settle it like men should. Ya don’t wanna kill unarmed men, do ya?”

Musgrave paused, thinking momentarily, but it didn't take long. His gun was still trained on the marshal. "Uh...yeah, yeah, I think I do. Don't rightly give a damn if a man has a gun or not...ya try to kill me, I'mma pay you back in spades."

"Ya can't do this!" Parsons whimpered, tears dripping down his cheeks. "Let us go, please..."

The outlaw wasn't selling pity for any of them. "Oh, would you have let me go? Nah, I don't think so. You all wanted to kill me...I saw it in yer eyes. I still see it. I could've begged you to lemme go, but I know it would've done no damn good...you should know the same thing. Won't do no good."

Despite his agony, Tennenbaum decided that he wouldn't allow Clint to savour his victory. He knew there was no other way this would end, and he hated himself for being unable to spare his friends. He figured he might as well get the last word. He would show no fear to this disgusting excuse for a human being.

"You ain't no man...no man does what you've done and lives with it. You ain't nothin' but a slimy worm, ya know that? You're a goddamn coward, Musgrave...ya hear me? A goddamn coward..."

Rage surged all through Clint at the marshal's words and his teeth began to grind. "What was it you said, Marshal? 'That earns you a trip to meet your maker?' Time to meet him!"

There was no hesitation left as Clint fired his gun at the marshal point-blank, and swiftly turned it to Parsons and Everett, shooting each of them in rapid succession. Both men went down, their deaths instant and painless. Tennenbaum grasped at his mouth, tumbling backward onto one of the large, round stones behind him and shifting it as he pushed against it.

"Ain't a goddamn coward," Clint murmured with finality.

The marshal slumped against the rock and clumsily slid to the dirt, gagging and gurgling from the injury. There was a soggy cough followed by shallow gasps, and Clint could see small pieces of white mixed with the blood flowing into a horrid river from his mouth. He knew then that his shot had smashed through a few of his front teeth before it pierced and passed through the back of his neck. It was certainly fatal.

Clint Musgrave was tempted to end the suffering of the marshal as he watched, but for taking his ear and proving to be quite a grievance, he ultimately decided to let him suffer from his mortal wound. It only lasted a few brief moments. Tennenbaum reached outward to Clint with a trembling hand, as though pleading for help, and his glazed eyes rolled back as his head fell forward. One final wheeze and the marshal was gone.

"Serves ya right, ya damn lawdog. You don't cross Clint Musgrave," he said, snorting and spitting a glob of phlegm on the marshal's bloodied face.

Eying the bodies before him, he felt a sense of accomplishment at what he had just done—he had

taken the lives of four men, one of them a U.S. Marshal, and had done so alone. These events would follow him and make him renowned, even though he had killed a number of people already. The ones before were easy, however. While he felt as though this would definitely bring trouble, the fame it would surely provide was more enticing. He was even tempted to take the badge still attached to Tennenbaum's duster, feeling it would make a perfect memento...yet he decided against it. With the money he had stolen, he could simply buy one.

His mind full of fantasies about his future infamy, he momentarily neglected what allowed him to gain the upper hand in the first place, though he was quickly reminded as the wind swirled around him. He could hear it again.

"I'll be back, Clinton," the voice uttered. "On the day of your end, I'll come to collect what is mine..."

"Right," he replied. Clint, still feeling dizzy from the loss of blood, figured maybe that the disembodied voice he kept hearing was part of his imagination. He could have found his gun out of pure luck...that's what it was. Yet he was still unsure of how exactly all three of the men, about to execute him, dropped their weapons all at the same moment. At that time, Clint shrugged it off—it didn't matter to him anyway. He was alive, and that was all that meant anything whatsoever.

That was how he felt at the time, at least. Clint enjoyed the fearsome reputation he had earned as "Earless" Clint, taking lives and funds as he saw fit as word and rumour fuelled his exploits even when he attempted to keep a low profile, but now, lucidity had graced him enough to allow him to see that the voice he had heard years before was not a hallucination of any sort. It did indeed belong to someone...or rather, some thing. And as Tennenbaum leaned in close, that familiar odour of smouldering fire and ash on its breath burned Clint's nostrils.

"What...are you?" Clint managed dumbly. He knew it wouldn't answer his question, and he was right.

"Clinton," it said again.

"No..."

Tennenbaum was amused. "You remember."

"But you...you said you was gonna come back at my end... my...my death? And I'm fine...ain't nothin' wrong with me!" He patted his chest confidently to emphasize his words. "I'm just fine!"

"For now, perhaps. But it will come...sooner than you may think. You're too arrogant for it not to come."

"No, I can't do this...I won't."

“You will...there is no choice. You begged for help and I did that for you...I gave you a gift, but there are always repercussions.”

“I only asked to live, damn you...” Clint challenged.

“And you have...but I gave you more...”

“I didn’t ask for it, goddamnit!”

Tennenbaum frowned with irritation. “And yet you received it, and accepted it. If you didn’t want it, you should’ve fought your own battle alone, and assuredly died a less than noble death.”

“But I was jus’ prayin’! I never thought anyone would actually help...”

“Of course not...humans never seem to realize, even after all of this time, that there are always those who listen, and even fewer who offer services. I’ve always been generous.” The festering marshal stumbled back methodically. “Clinton, I prolonged your existence, and in turn, I provided you with much more. I’ve enjoyed watching what you’ve done, and I know that you enjoyed it all...you loved killing all of those people...but it’s nearly finished.”

“Bullshit,” Clint opposed weakly. Try as he might to deny what Tennenbaum was saying, he truly had loved every moment, every heinous experience, and wanted to continue on just as he had been. Being the cause of death for so many so undeserving of life was a power few knew, and even less appreciated, but it was becoming more obvious that this being knew something he didn’t. From what it was saying, it was likely very old, possibly ancient, and had crafted deals like this many times with many men before him.

Maybe it was immortal. Maybe it knew the future. Maybe it was the Devil himself, or one of his disciples. These were all thoughts that Clint Musgrave felt were completely irrational and impossible to comprehend. He didn’t even want to try—after all, he was too preoccupied with the idea that he was about to perish, and he could only think of possible ways to prevent it, all of which eluded him.

Unknown to the outlaw as he debated with Tennenbaum, there was someone else that had joined the two of them in the street, moving quietly nearly fifty feet away. Johnny Wells was able to get his unharmed chubby hand on an old pistol and had stumbled out of the saloon, fiercely determined to settle his score with “Earless” Clint. He was about to have his chance. Thankfully for Johnny, the outlaw was foolish enough not to escape Tombstone while he had the ability to do so.

“I gotchu now, you dirty piece of filth...I gotchu...” Johnny said to himself.

There was a cocking of a rusty hammer, and Clint heard it.

“MUSGRAVE, YA COWARD!”

Johnny Wells wanted the outlaw's undivided attention. He wanted to see into his very whites as he killed him, but it seemed "Earless" Clint was talking to someone. Johnny was perplexed for a few seconds as he didn't see anything there, nothing but air. So he called out once more.

"TURN 'ROUND, YOU YELLA SONUVABITCH! I'MMA SHOOT YOU WITH YOU LOOKIN' RIGHT AT ME!"

But Clint was ready for him, gripping his iron as Tennenbaum watched. "NO YOU WON'T!"

In the entire amount of a second, Clint, in practiced bravado, had unsheathed his gun, pulled the hammer, and spun around, sending a hateful shot into his opponent. Johnny Wells shuddered and his chest began running red, but he wasn't finished, weakly attempting to aim at Clint with draining ability. Unfortunately, he knew he wouldn't succeed, and the outlaw shared his waning outlook by proving him right.

One after another, Clint swiftly fired three more into his assailant, filling his gut with lead that tore his inner organs to paper. In a show of unadulterated arrogance, Clint spun his weapon on his finger and smoothly placed it back into his holster. The rancher, utterly ravaged with numbness, choked and retched, vomiting bloody chunks as he released his gun and collapsed headfirst with a thunderous slam. The engorged mound that was the late Johnny Wells twitched one last time and all movement stopped. It was over, and Musgrave felt the need to celebrate his victory.

The residents of Tombstone, or at least those within the vicinity, began making their way outside to see the cause of the commotion. There were the usual gasps and whimpers, primarily from the women, and they all looked toward Musgrave with expressions of fright and loathing. There seemed to be no form of law, no sheriff of any kind, in sight. It was wise. Clint turned back to Tennenbaum with a stained smile, brushing the accumulated dust from his clothes.

"Haaaaaaaah, ya see? Can't kill me! CAN'T KILL OL' EARLESS CLINT! If that was supposed to be the end of me, then I'm happy to disappoint you!"

The people believed Clint to be speaking directly to them, unaware that he was talking to something else entirely. A low sound caught the ears of many of them. They looked past Boothill Cemetery, located on the outskirts, for what was coming, which became apparent amid the hushed whispers of the crowd.

"Premature of you, Clinton," the marshal said in a smoky tone.

There was a figure on a white stallion approaching, and the citizens on the street all fell silent as he drew closer. The clopping steps of the horse slowed as the rider squinted at the formerly living Johnny Wells, and Clint could faintly see him mouthing the word "No."

The man clambered off of his horse with the effort of someone most distraught, and he hurriedly ran over to the body of Johnny. He dropped quickly to his knees and turned the heavyset cadaver

over to see his face, and instead of crying or shouting, he merely knelt and removed his brown, curved hat, as if in prayer. He was still for only a couple of seconds.

Clint quickly acknowledged that this man knew his latest victim. It only meant more problems, of course, but he would deal with it. He'd put an end to it just as he had with the deceased rancher. His right hand drifted back to his holster. Clint Musgrave was always prepared.

"Who did this?" the man said. "Who killed him?"

Clint felt a number of stares focus on him like hot torches, blazing through his bones. He could see the man stand up from Johnny's resting place and stare. He was tall and very powerful in his motions as he walked.

"Who the hell're you?" Clint questioned, though he could likely make a pretty good guess as to the man's relationship to the victim.

"I'm Harlow Wells...you just shot my father, you bastard. You killed my pa."

Good, the criminal thought. Glad I did. He didn't know when to shut his fat trap.

"You killed him and now I'm gonna kill you!"

Harlow had the same eyes as his father, but not much else. He was leaner, more serious, and not one to expend words on someone—Harlow was someone focused on action, and it showed as he stomped toward Clint, his hands clenched tightly into fists, stopping just fifteen feet away.

"You prolly shot him in the back, dincha? Yella bastard."

"No," Clint gulped, trying to stomach the insult. "I put a knife in his hand, he came out here...shot 'im in the front. They all saw it."

No one nearby provided any testimony.

Harlow Wells didn't care. "You an' me, stranger! I'm givin' you one chance to defend yourself...let's do this like men, even if you don't deserve it one damn bit!"

Clint briefly returned to the Choctaw nation in his mind, hearing the words spoken by Harlow in the voice of the Texas-born Marshal Tennenbaum about concluding their business like men. The déjà-vu was uncanny. He looked all around for the marshal, but there was only Harlow and the developing mob of people appearing in the street around them. He was afraid when first seeing Tennenbaum, but now, strangely enough, he felt even more encumbered with anxiety now that the thing was gone. Seeing it provided something of a hint of comfort—the same way that seeing an oncoming stampede allowed the opportunity for fight or flight.

"How 'bout it?" Harlow asked, moving his hand to his own firearm at his belt.

“Fine by me.” Clint gently groped his pistol’s handle, wrapping every finger around it as though they were snakes constricting a hapless groundhog. He would send the younger Wells to meet his father. He was sure he probably wasn’t even a skilled shot. Most ranchers or cattlehands had very little ability or practice when it came to weapons. Perhaps if Harlow had challenged Clint to a contest of lassoing ponies, then this would be more difficult.

No words signalled what came. Both men instinctively pulled their guns and took aim at each other, but as the world around them seemed to slow, Clint saw Tennenbaum once again. His skeletal fingers rested on Harlow’s broad shoulder. The marshal’s mouth was stretched obscenely wide, as if cackling, and Clint knew. He could feel the lightness of his gun.

As the last possible second passed, Clint realized all too late that he had made the most fatal of errors: his pistol was empty. He had spent one bullet on the whiskey bottle, one killing the bartender, and the other four murdering Johnny Wells, an act that seemed like overkill in retrospect. Had Clint instead reloaded his weapon once the obese heckler was among the dead instead of allowing arrogance to cloud his judgment, he might have had a chance. But the steel in his hand was merely a paperweight.

It was a fact known to the marshal, who only showed a mouthful of jagged teeth as he eyed Harlow’s pistol. The young rancher squeezed the trigger. Clint attempted to hurriedly lower his weapon as a show of mercy, but the effort was all for naught. Nothing he could do at all.

One powerful shot rang out, followed swiftly by a deathly silence carried on the gentle wind. Both men remained still for a moment, the smoke from the fired gun swirling around them as the gathered crowd tried to ascertain the results of what had just transpired. It was quickly evident as to whom the loser was as a few slow claps came from some of the more pleased residents.

You’re too arrogant for it not to come.

Clint grunted, clutching his abdomen in his trembling hands as he dropped his gun, and he exerted every effort to contain the pain pouring out of him. As he tumbled to his knees, he could feel himself growing weak. He knew that what had just happened was what Tennenbaum had alluded to—this was the end. Harlow shoved his six-shooter into his belt, and his jaw tightened with satisfaction. He had delivered justice, and all that remained was seeing it through to its conclusion.

As scarlet poured out from “Earless” Clint onto the sand, staining the grit beneath him, he stared straight ahead in unquestionable terror. Tennenbaum loomed menacingly, almost towering in size, behind Harlow Wells. The marshal’s shape suddenly moved through Wells like liquid through a thin membrane, coming directly for Musgrave.

He only gazed at the being for a moment, hearing those spurs, and tried desperately to grab his gun. Clint’s rationality scattered as he wildly clawed at the sand, nearly attaining his prize, but Harlow ran over and merely kicked the metal away. He thought his father’s killer was attempting to arm himself to have another chance at shooting him. The coward was going to die, and he was going to make sure that no escape routes were present.



“I don’t think so, you sonovobitch.”

Clint only looked up at Harlow with tears welling, but not in hatred—Harlow knew a scared animal when he saw one. He was unsympathetic. The outlaw looked past the dead rancher’s son and then back to him, holding out his soiled hands, begging.

“Goddamnit...goddamnit...gimme yer gun! ... Please! PLEASE! GIMME YER GUN! HELP ME! SAVE ME!”

“From what? Only thing that’ll help you now is a doctor or a preacher...neither’ll be comin’ for ya, I’d imagine.” Harlow smirked. Thinking these were the mad ravings of someone simply afraid of embracing death, he played along. But Clint was more serious than he’d ever been, even in all of the threats of harm he’d made against anyone in his path. The voice of whatever had taken Tennenbaum’s shape spoke.

“I gave you what you wanted...it must be repaid...”

“No...No, goddamn you...I can’t die like this...”

“I gave you infamy, Clinton...and I’ll give you so much more!”

The thing calling itself Tennenbaum lurched forward at a ponderous pace, the spurs on its boots continuing to jingle with menace as if it savoured the coming act. The smile faded into a malevolent grimace as its face began to peel away in blackened, uneven strips, barely held on by sticky, coagulated blood and rotting muscle tissue. Its decayed human eyes began to bulge, cracking open with wet pops as loathsome juices laced with squirming maggots spilled down its cheeks, and its hair dropped off in slithery clumps. As the remains fell to its feet, the creature’s true appearance was slowly revealed to the young outlaw. He could only wail with unbridled horror.

And standing among the Tombstone citizens in the street were more familiar faces to the dying outlaw. Clint gasped as he saw those he had murdered throughout his life—the stagecoach drivers he killed outside of Dodge City, the young boy and his mother that he executed in Oregon, the members of Tennenbaum’s posse, and all of his other victims over the years...all of them watching in silence, and all at various degrees of decomposition. And now, even Johnny and Eustace were standing among them, their bloody wounds fresh and their eyes the colour of ivory. They were all smiling.

They were awaiting Clint’s arrival into their company, and his journey was beginning.

“NOOO! GOD, NOOOOOO!”

“You plead to your ‘God’...but only I will answer...”

Harlow swiftly stepped back as he realized that Clint wasn’t speaking to or looking at him, but at

something else that wasn't there—something that was shambling closer and closer as Clint struggled to drag himself away.

“...The hell?” Harlow whispered. “What’s goin’ on?!”

All of the townspeople nearby stood in bewilderment as Clint was suddenly lifted up into a kneeling position in a way that he was physically incapable of doing, like a marionette plucked from the floor by a puppet master’s invisible strings.

“GOD, PLEASE, SOMEBODY HELP-” Musgrave tried to yell, but his pleas were gruesomely cut short by whatever had him. Praying for God for help or forgiveness wouldn’t save him. Not this time.

His eyes rolled into the back of his skull as he was violently seized by the unseen force, something that gripped him in a deathly embrace and would never let go. He shrieked briefly in terrible agony before the air was sucked from his lungs. The veins underneath his skin pulsed outward as the blood within ceased to flow and his capillaries began to burst. He contorted his face and body, twisting in bone-splintering motions, and his form seemed to shrivel like a dirty raisin baking in the sun as streams of darkened plasma erupted from his eyes and nose and spilled around his knees.

Everyone gathered around could only look on in fright and confusion with restrained gasps and muffled cries, some covering the eyes of the children in the crowd, as they watched this man succumb to a bullet in the gut in the most otherworldly mortifying way. It was as though the Devil himself was consuming him from the inside, draining him of life.

“Good Lord in Heaven!” one of the elderly women shouted. “Look at that!”

And they could all see—Clint’s hair was quickly changing from its original muddy colour to a striking white, starting at the roots of every strand and traveling all the way to each curly, frayed end. Whatever he was experiencing, whatever was viciously dragging him into oblivion, was perhaps the most horrifying thing ever witnessed by mortal eyes. It would be an image that would follow him forever, tormenting his very soul long after he passed into the void.

With one final wince, Clint’s carcass crumpled in a heap of dust. As the cloud settled on the ground around the corpse, the audience watching could see that all that was left was a fleshy sack of bones—a dried, hollow husk bearing little semblance of ever being a man. The body had the appearance of one that had been left in the Arizona sun for weeks, perhaps of someone who had perished from thirst and starvation, but closer examination by anyone not easily nauseated attested otherwise.

On Clint’s face was an expression of undeniable and unspeakable terror permanently etched underneath the drying fluid exiting every orifice. His sunken eyes were pale, his swollen tongue was black, and his jaw was open in an inhuman, eternal scream that no one could ever hear. “Earless” Clint’s infamy as a feared outlaw had come to an end, albeit a curiously frightening and unexplainable one.

Two days later, Eustace and Johnny were each given a quiet funeral service. Eustace had no relatives and was buried in a small plot outside of town, and Johnny was buried at his ranch next to his wife as “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” was played by a small string quartet—Harlow and his family, when he had one, would likely be interred right next to him when the time came for each of them. Much of the town was in attendance at both funerals, though the visitors on behalf of Eustace honoured his memory with too many drinks in his saloon beforehand and afterward.

As for the coward Clinton Musgrave, the desiccated remains were thrown into a small burlap sack and tossed in a deep, unmarked grave at Boothill alongside a few other killers and thieves. The people of Tombstone found it fitting, though no one offered any form of a eulogy except perhaps for a number of curses and crude remarks. The town tried to forget him and what he’d done, and most certainly the events surrounding his odd demise, but still rumours and stories circulated.

John Clum, founder of the local newspaper—the Tombstone *Epitaph*—sat at his desk in his dimly lit office, reading over documents about local mining operations. There was a knock at the door and one of his workers, a writer of short stature and red hair named Cecil, stepped inside. Under his arm was a stack of papers two inches thick.

“Sir, I was wonderin’ how you wanted this story to be posed in tomorrow’s edition? Apparently everyone who passes through continues askin’ about what happened to “Earless” Clint, and you know they’ll only keep pryin’. Seems this won’t be easily covered up...word travels.”

Clum sighed with boredom. “That it does.”

Cecil waited. “Well? How should we go about it, sir?”

There was no reply for a moment as Clum tried to finish reading. In the periphery of his vision, he knew Cecil was not leaving anytime soon. He placed the stationery on the desk and ran a rough hand over his bald head.

“Lord knows this town doesn’t need any more trouble,” he said. “I think we should just go forward with sayin’ that he died from the gunshot and the gunshot alone. I cannot foresee anyone outside of this town who witnessed said event seeing the truth in what really happened, even though the circumstances are still not fully known to anyone here...they’re even more difficult to begin attempting to fathom. I don’t even think I can believe it myself, and I watched it all...I doubt it’s even worth speaking about to anyone who was right there when it occurred—no, not worth discussing even then.

“Clinton Musgrave, known to all as “Earless” Clint and an infamous outlaw and murderer of innocents, murdered Eustace McClane and John Wells, residents of Tombstone, and was shot by Harlow Wells, son of John. He quickly perished from the wound. Died a death meant only for

the most cowardly of men, and now his body is a permanent resident at Boothill. Nothing less, nothing more. That's what'll be kept in the remembrance of everyone in the territory, no matter what questions will likely be asked..."

"He lived a coward and died a coward, Mr. Clum."

"I believe that simple explanation would be best, don't you think, Cecil?" Clum posed with a raised eyebrow.

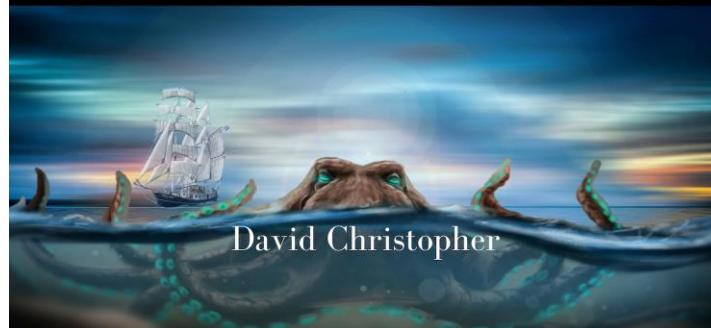
The vision of "Earless" Clint's emaciated corpse slipped into the deepest recesses of Cecil's mind like crude oil: Those grating shrieks. That awful, shrivelled face. His stark-white tresses. His pearly, deadened eyes. God, those eyes.

He shuddered as ice filled his veins and his muscles trembled as a tremor erupted from him. Despite the truth of the occurrence, a truth that he would never understand for the remainder of his days on God's Earth, Cecil was inclined to agree.

THE END

GONZO PULP PUBLICATIONS  
PRESENT

# Long John Silver and the Squid-God of Lemuria



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## A VAMPIRE AND A NECROPHILE WALK INTO A CAR CRASH by Rob Bliss

### Chapter 1: A Car Crash

Once, it was a '57 Chevy Bel-Air two-door convertible, white wall tires, powder blue, modified with an Ikagami 5000 turbo charger and nitrous oxide. Illegal under the hood, but the classic body seduced every cop who stopped it to let it just keep rolling on, tearing up the blacktop.

Zack Crapulent had been bequeathed it by his granddaddy after granddaddy died from Tijuana whore syphilis—best time he ever had with his boots on.

Zack was a testosterone-driven idiot with abdominal muscles you could scrape your cigarette-stained teeth on to a pearly white. Many girls had done so, plus two guys whom Zack did not discuss in mixed company. One of the guys had breasts, which had enticed a drunken Zack so much that by the time the panties came off and the prize in the package was revealed, Zack was beyond caring. He drove back from Appaloosa (who knew there were trannies there?) in the morning thinking about the night before. His erection grew. Testosterone told him to take care of business. The cop who pulled him over (top down, very visible interior) was less seduced by the car's body and more driven to lust by Zack's groin. He became the second guy (no tits) whom Zack was sodomized by, this time to get out of a ticket.

To reassert his manliness (after weeping as he jerked off in his bedroom), Zack rough-fucked several girls under the age of eighteen. And some of their mothers. Heterosexual promiscuity always got a man's libido back on track, away from homosexual questions, compromises, and stimulations.

Back to normal now, Zack invited two of his most asshole guy friends, plus their slutty girlfriends, on a vacation. One of the girls was forced to bring along her fifteen-year-old sister. The younger sister was happy to be partying with grown-ups (as she called them, showing her youth), and had already used the upcoming experience to brag to her friends and enemies, thus heightening her social status in the high school hierarchy.

Her older sister hated babysitting. Zack and the other males were excited to have the younger girl along since she had imbibed lots of milk as a child and, thus, had huge fucking tits—way bigger than her almost flat older sister.

The other girlfriend was also jealous of the kid, but she was also kinda bi so she could switch-hit and get turned on by the adolescent hottie squeezed in beside her. It was the airheaded older sister who made the younger sit thigh-to-thigh between the girlfriend and her boyfriend, much to the excitement of both.

They were all off for a long weekend in Scattalooga City, a beach town on the Gulf of Mexico. There they would drink heavily, try every drug sold to them, participate in uncondoned nudism, plus bareback copulation of various sexual orientations (trannie, cross-dresser, hermaphrodite, girl-on-girl strap-on action), and one of them would become pregnant. They would also enjoy fisticuffs in the parking lots of bars and strip clubs. Two would spend the night in jail, and one

would be forced to sell her (or his) body to make bail for the imprisoned.

However.

Given the increased prevalence in these troubled, confused times of the multi-universe theory (in conjunction with fractal chaos theory, string theories, and pure coincidence that turning left instead of right can make all the difference), the sextet sardines squeezed into the car would not make any of their hedonistic dreams come true.

The trunk was full of booze. Liquor bottles stood like slanted city towers between the feet of the passengers. Once a bottle was emptied, it exploded into fractal geometry on the asphalt behind the screaming Chevy.

Naturally, six morons on vacation couldn't get their shit together quickly enough to leave for their vacation at a reasonable time. Which opened up the waiting presence of an alternate universe.

So Zack had to hit the nitrous several times to speed through time and space to reach their perpetually late destination. The nitrous canister strapped under the hood was soon empty, the moon had risen, and the car was still a few hours from paradise.

Frustrated, Zack drank heavily (stopping every once in a while to pull more bottles from the trunk, paradise arriving even later and, thus, increasing the time and fate portal that awaited them). Judgement impaired, penis rising every time he felt one of the girls in the back stand up to raise her arms and cheer, her breasts squishing against the back of Zack's head, the girl sometimes falling bodily forward over his shoulder into his lap ... sorry, where was I? Oh right.

Zack drank as he drove. His girlfriend, Wendy-Loo Shabazz, rubbed his crotch, slipped her French-manicured nails down through Zack's razor-burn pubes, and lightly diddled him. (Which hadn't happened since Uncle Chester came to his sixth birthday party.) Simultaneously, she tucked an empty, unexploded bottle of peach schnapps with a long neck up under her tight denim skirt (no panties) ... but to further describe what she did would be gratuitously sexual and have almost nothing to do with the rest of the plot.

(The author is trying to forge a writing career in, apparently, horror—according to his tax statement—and has reserved his erotica stories for his other pseudonym, Alexia P. Lime, who has recently signed a contract for her first novel, *Oily Texan Seamen Torpedoes*, to be released as an eBook, November 2015.)

Anyway, back to the plot.

While the car was jauntily slipping all over the midnight road, tires jiggling on their axles, black skids snaking curlicues behind the chugging muffler, Zack took a left.

Into a tree.

The alternate universe had won. (It usually does, but when it does, people say that's how things were supposed to be, though they always hope things would be different.) The car had been halted at the side of a country road, with a corn field tall with stalks just behind a scattering of thick, ancient oaks. Most of the corn was Native American corn with multi-coloured kernels ranging across the brown, reddish-brown, occasionally blue spectrum. Weird corn, pre-dating the corn of the white man. Spooky corn!

No lights except the moon, its hollow mouth silently laughing at the folly of Man (and their girlfriends and little sisters).

Zack and Wendy-Loo speared through the windshield. Zack's erect penis was severed with a wet zip by a low-lying branch. Wendy's schnapps flew like a high-fly ball that would win the big game for the male-only team (cheerleaders spinning on their limbs like Catherine wheels, some with no panties to increase school spirit), but the bottle did not smash. It tumbled into a hedge where a marsupial family of twelve would suckle from its sustenance.

Both Zack and Wendy-Loo hung like scarecrows in the branches of opposing trees. Theirs was a love not to be broken even in death.

The other two males—let's call them Johnny Walker Red and Johnny Walker Black (no alcoholic relation)—also flew from the vehicle. Red was dead, limbs twisted into a swastika (his granpappy would be proud), and Black was alive but not conscious. He had landed on his face, arms tucked under his torso, open palms and arrow fingers tucked like an Olympian diver, his toes pointed like a pigeon-toed Japanese girl who thought if she made herself look small then she'd be cuter than she really was.

The two girlfriends, Sally-Jane Treblinka (her granmammy—if she hadn't been illiterate and had known any history not directly related to her own backwoods county—would be proud), and Mary-Jo-Jean-Hester Grok (older sister to the hot young pseudo-slut with the big tits) both flew from the car like angles.

Their arm fat became their wings. Mary-Jo-Jean ... whatever ... had her head snapped by a tree branch and was dead before she hit the ground. Sally-Jane lived, breathing shallow, but had a noxious, thick stain of piss and shit that was beginning to corrode her mustard-yellow nylons (no panties).

The younger Grok, Ella-May-Beulah-May-Ella, was the only one who stayed in the vehicle. Being smaller and well-wedged in between two nymphomaniac groppers had saved her life. She was conscious, but not feeling good. She lay like a swami across the crystal bed of bottles on the floor in the backseat, her thin body secured from further harm, though she would have terrible back pain and a headache and two sore nipples and an inner thigh bruised by thumbs when she awoke. Her skirt was hiked up to reveal her "Hello Pussy" panties, cheap knock-offs of the original brand name (all subtlety lost with cheap panties). Her older sister hadn't tried to teach the younger sibling that panties were actually optional clothing, best used as an exhibitionistic accessory or not worn at all (also an exhibitionistic accessory). The elder would let the younger find out the old fashioned way: get rejected one too many times until true desperation set in.



So that's four dead, three alive.

Enter the vampire. He had witnessed the crash while hanging upside-down as a bat from the tree that broke the car's joyride. Almost fell from the limb, but his claws were strong. (And a clumsy bat would get made fun of by other bats, possibly eaten—survival of the lesser idiots, even in the vampire world.)

His name was L. Draka Grimoire Gehenna Hellion von Spankula. The “L” stood for Lester. He was mocked in school. He bit his childhood enemies, but they just mocked him more. “Y’call that a bite? My toothless succubus granny can suck out a splinter better than you can suck blood. What? Are you full? Got a tummy ache? I got the measles, dumbass! And I still got lots more blood—come on, who wants a taste of my disease?”

When not calling him ‘Lester the Pussy Vampire’, the school children mocked his last name and gave him the deriding moniker of “Spanky”. It stuck. He learned to prefer ‘Lester’.

Spanky the Pussy Vampire was old-fashioned because he had no fashionable taste, and could only resort to stereotype when dressing himself. His mother too often dressed him in corduroy pants and wool sweaters with asinine depictions of sleigh rides and narcoleptic kittens suckling yarn balls, knitted by his granmama, and which beckoned every female member of his thousand-year-old family to call him a “cutie-patootie”. The male members of his family hawked up a blood loogie, spat into the belladonna garden, and mumbled the word “pussy” under their sulphurous breath.

He’d show them—he’d show them all!

He would, instead, dress in all-black except for a white starched shirt, a tight necklace choking his Adam’s apple bejewelled with a glittering pendant bearing some archaic (and, therefore, evil) word or saying in a dead language. His black shoes were always polished to a mirrored shine. Fingernails trimmed and filed to points. Face pale from lead-based powder with a touch of rouge at the corners of his mouth, to look like he had just feasted when he was actually starving, eating only moths and mosquitoes, most of his time spent as a bat. Occasionally (especially out in the countryside), he’d suck the neck of a cow. Not too often, however, because the parasites that lived on cows soon set up small villages on him, and he’d have to scratch himself raw to try and vacate the little shits. Only an acidic, noxious shampoo would burn the villages to the ground.

Spanky felt that in no way did he dress like a total fag. Others begged to differ, which was why he spent a lot of time alone, away from any major metropolis, and only bit people who were too dazed to take a good look at his choice of garb. He hated being insulted by his meal.

Oh yeah—he also had a cape. Black on the outside, red interior, reached down to his heels, shone like mother-of-pearl in the moonlight.

But he was absolutely not gay.

(Although he adored Abba and the Bee Gees and Judy Garland and would give his eye teeth to see a production of Jesus Christ Superstar—the gayest musical ever ripped off—Jesus as a very hairy hippie homo who liked his guy friends more than his girlfriends—although that could just be historical fact—but he didn’t sing! Granted, every musical is kinda gay in some way, even Cats, although that is credited with inventing the awesome sexual art of the furry. People fucking while dressed as cartoon animals. Frickin’ hot! Spanky, however, would only see a musical as long as he, dressed in his vampire clothing, wouldn’t be interpreted as an ardent, kitschy fan or the star’s understudy. This is why he refused to see The Phantom of the Opera.)

Spanky’s gaze wandered lustily over the car crash. He licked his nails, judging which body to gorge on first. The full moon illuminated his pale visage, showed that his mouth rouge was demonically smeared and running a bit with his drooling saliva.

He stepped softly toward the first unmoving male who caught his eye (not gay). A breeze slipped along the ground and twisted his cape around his feet. He tripped, punched his nose into the earth.

“Cocksucker!” (not gay) he howled to the moon. The moon laughed.

Twisting and spinning on the ground, Spanky fought with his cape, choked himself as he tried to wrench it off his back, but only made it a tighter noose.

Eventually, he was successful. Choked and coughed like a three-pack-a-day smoker as he flung the cape off into a tree, where it hung like the wrinkled body of an old man.

(The author does not want to describe Spanky’s lone war with the cape too much so as to avoid gratuitous comedy. Sex and comedy have no place in serious vampire literature.)

Spanky gave the cape the finger, then brushed himself down, swearing at all the dirt smears down his arms and legs and staining his white shirt. Tried to think of a cleanser powerful enough to bring the shirt back to its albatross whiteness, hoped his dry cleaner knew of one.

He smoothed a soft hand (not gay) across his temples, pushing back his slicked hair. A single finger combed each eyebrow. Opened his eyes wide as he tilted up his chin to gaze over the delicious carnage.

He straddled the broad back of Johnny Walker Black. Like sitting on a stilled bull, the vampire’s delicate fingers pried down the collar of Black’s muscle shirt. With the thick muscular neck exposed, its trapezius muscles were like well-toughened flanks of steak lying under Sparky’s glowing eyes.

The vampire’s penis (vampires have genitals?) grew rigid along the shaft of the vertebrae of Johnny’s spine. When confronted by an unconscious body that incites various hungers, both human and vampire may attempt to satiate as many of those appetites as possible.

Spanky reached back a hand and spread his wide palm over the relaxed left cheek of Black’s

buttocks. He squeezed and felt his hollow heart swell with fire. He measured his body length with that of Johnny, and determined that he could slip his rigid crotch into the denim indent of Black's ass crack ... while still sinking his fangs into the sleeping man's virgin neck muscle.

Spanky aligned himself and began slowly humping. (Not ga—never mind.) His eyes rolled back into his head like an orgasming shark as his lust percolated to a boil. Spanky's hands gripped Black's massive shoulders to hold his thin vampire body steady to not slip off the relaxed back beneath him. The vampire's hips sped up, his groin pummelling Johnny's ass.

The ass relaxed even more as it received the hammering massage of its life. A great fart blew out of the denim, helping to fuel the piston smacking into it.

Spanky almost ejaculated in his shiny starched pants. (He'd deal with the dry cleaner's inquisitive and disgusted stares later.) He wanted his hunger and his ecstasy to be simultaneous, so his teeth sank—finally—into the neck muscle. Spanky's hips rebounded off Johnny's jiggling ass. The buttons on Spanky's fly (very old fashioned) strained and thread snapped from the friction.

Blood jetted into Spanky's mouth as whatever kind of asexual semen vampires have squirted across his remaining buttons, through the fly, and onto the dusty, dusty ground.

Spanky's tense muscle relaxed and his weight sagged on top of Johnny (still unconscious, but now dreaming strange and exciting dreams). Spanky's chest heaved, sweat trickled down from his temples, saliva and blood slipped from under his tongue to stain Black's beautifully pierced neck.

The vampire kinda felt like a cigarette.

“That was so gay!”

Spanky leapt off Johnny, spun astraddle the dreaming hunk of man meat, to turn in the direction of the voice.

His small grey penis hung like a curled snail from between two buttons. Eventually, he would follow the eyes of his voyeur, and tuck the little guy back into his pants. (Why didn't he wear underwear? he asked himself days later, thinking back as a panty-less bat. Do vampires wear underwear, or do they always go commando?)

A necrophiliac, Percy Persimmon, sat on the trunk of the smashed car, at first eyeing the young girl on the floor of the back seat, but more fascinated by disgust at the vampire's performance.

He was skinnier than Spanky. Knees and elbows just enlarged balls of bone, little meat, no muscle, skin an unhealthy grey, as bloodless as the corpses he liked to fuck. More so, since every corpse has its blood pooled to its lower point, following gravity, so some torsos actually have a healthy glow. Unlike Percy.

A necrophiliac knew he was no temptation for a vampire, so he was not afraid.

“How much did you see?” Spanky asked in a panic.

“Enough to know you’re not the average vampire—fuckin’ pervert.”

Percy the necro slid a long skeletal finger down the crease of his tongue and pretended to gag as he rolled his eyes in their sunken sockets.

“I’m not a ... I was just ... this guy—shut up!” Spanky retorted. He stepped away from Johnny and paced slow half-moons in the dirt. “Well, if you know I’m a vampire, then ... you know ... you saw what I was doing.”

“Yeah, you were dry-humping that guy’s ass ... well, maybe not so dry.”

Spanky now followed the necro’s eyes and jammed a cone of fingers into his fly to tuck away his shame.

“Shut up!”

Percy hopped off the car, twisted a bone ankle, limped to approach Spanky. “Look, dude, if you’re gay, that’s cool.” Percy caught himself sounding like an after-school special.

“I’m not gay! I was feeding on the blood of the living! ‘Cause I’m a vampire ... stupid.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.” Percy hobbled around Spanky to get a better look at Johnny. “I guess you could say I’m kinda gay too. Sorta kinda, not really. Guy or girl, it doesn’t really matter—I just want ‘em dead. Although if I have a choice, I prefer chicks.”

Spanky stepped back as he glared at the necro inspecting Johnny.

“What ... what ... what are you looking for?”

“So is this guy dead?” Percy asked, turning Johnny’s head to one side to inspect the tooth punctures. “Or was he alive and you just turned him into the undead? ‘Cause I don’t do the undead.”

“What do you want to know for?” Spanky asked, still not clueing in, afraid to guess what he was thinking. The necrophiliac, after all, hadn’t formally introduced himself as such. And necros didn’t have a standard ‘costume’, as vampires did.

Percy looked around the car wreck, saw Zack and Wendy-Loo hanging in the trees, saw the twisted jaw of Mary-Jo-etc., and the tossed corpse of Johnny Walker Red.

He scrunched up his nose as he stepped over to Sally-Jane, stooped down to see the full spread of her faeces. Hooking two fingers into the waistband of her nylons, Percy peeled the stretched

fabric down to her knees.

Then he ripped her shirt off with several mighty yanks—the front of her t-shirt advertising, in ironed-on glitter, that she was a proud “Cum Dumpster”—

(—“Mighty Yank’s Cum Dumpster”, the author’s second erotica eBook, scheduled for publication, Fall 2042—)

—and used the shirt to do a half-assed job of wiping Sally-Jane’s bum.

The necro’s mouth curled in disgust as he did his preparations. Spat once into the dust, then unzipped the fly of his faded jeans.

“I can do this, I can do this ...” he said as a mantra. “She’s not too bad. I’ve done worse.”

“What the hell, man!” Spanky said, eyes a-goggle at his companion.

The necro halted his zipper, shot a silver bullet glare at the vampire. The vampire was immune to it because he wasn’t a werewolf. Had it been a garlic stare, however ... Lord knows garlic is more lethal than a bullet. Anyhoo ...

“Hey ... piss off!” Percy shot back. “You had your fun, now let me have mine.” He shook his head as he looked back at Sally-Jane’s luscious, slightly shit-streaked, ass, and mumbled, “freak”.

“You fuck the dead?” Now Spanky had his eureka. He was not a subtle vampire. Vampires sometimes aren’t. Their fangs give them away when they smile (to any who weren’t brain dead or blind or filled with suicidal lust), and rarely did a vampire start small-talk with a potential victim with, “So what’s up with blood? Doesn’t it piss you off having so much of it? I could help you get rid of some, you know, if you want ... if you’re not using it all or ... whatever, whatever, here’s my number—let me know.”

“Of course I fuck the dead—I’m a necrophiliac!” Percy said, then groaned “asshole” under his breath as he kneaded Sally-Jane’s ass cheeks.

A small moan burbled from her throat as her head flopped to one side.

Percy punched his penis back into his zipper and flew up onto his feet, staring down in shock at the full—living—body of Sally-Jane.

“Fuck! Bitch is still alive!”

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Spanky said, licking his bloody fingers. “Don’t you just hate that?”

“Shut up, dick.” Percy pointed a wavering arm and a sharp finger at Sally-Jane’s body like George McFly saying “Get your damn hands off her!” But Percy said, “I don’t fuck the living—

you do!”

“I do not!”

“You just shot your load on buddy’s ass—fag!”

“I’m not a fag!”

The wind howled. The necro spun his eyes around at the scene of carnage. Rubbed his chin.  
“Fuck it—that chick looks dead, they all look dead ... I still got a lot of options here.”

He limped over to the trees where Zack and Wendy-Loo hung. Hopped and grabbed Wendy-Loo’s foot, but only her shoe came off in his hand.

He waved Spanky over. “Help me get these two down.”

“Fuck you, do your own dirty work,” Spanky said, gazing down at Sally-Jane, as he judged whether he had the lead-lined stomach that the necro had. Well, he could keep to her upper half ... maybe roll her over, concentrate on her from the collarbone up. Though she was female ...

Percy hopped and swatted the dangling feet of Wendy-Loo and Zack. With each hop, his ankle twisted more and burned like the fires of Gehenna (no relation to one of Spanky’s fake royal lineage middle names).

He gave up and practically crawled over to the snapped-neck corpse of Mary-Jo-Jean-Hester Grok. Checked her pulse ... though her open vacant eyes and the rip in her neck skin should’ve told him that her wonderful life, and her sisterly jealousy, had ended. Checked her ass for moisture and an unholy stench. He salivated as he unzipped again.

“Yeah, yeah, this is the one—this is a nice one, too ... damn, Percy, it’s your lucky night.”

He rolled her over, wrenched her shirt (“Stop staring at these ... or else pay me”, her shirt read in silver and gold glitter, trying to draw the male eye her way, and away from her sister’s shirt ... which read nothing since it didn’t have to advertise what it strained against).

(—the author does not have an upcoming book using a similar title since it’s far too long—he likes to keep his titles short ...)

... sorry ...

... wrenched her shirt over her head, ripped open her button fly (she and the vampire could’ve traded fashion tips), peeled her paint-tight jeans down to her ankles, and slipped them off her pedicured feet.

“Oh my God—seriously? Seriously?” Spanky ejaculated, but not in a good way. “You’re seriously gonna do that right here ... in front of me?”

Percy the necrophiliac positioned himself between Mary-Jo's legs, flopping them to either side of his bare knees.

"You don't have to watch, pervert. Why don't you rub that guy's ass again? I won't tell if you don't."

"Oh my God! This is so ... wow ... really?" Spanky said, throwing up his hands, spinning on a heel, spinning back to see if the necro was really going through with it.

He was.

When one is faced with a car crash, despite one's potential disgust and aversion to all of life's little horrors, one often can't help but look.

"That's gross," Spanky said as he watched Percy's hips move. "That's just fucking gross! That is wrong!"

"Would you shut up—I can't concentrate," Percy said, focussing on his stroke, smiling into Mary-Jo's lifeless stare. "Damn, I love it when they're still warm."

Spanky dropped to the ground and heaved his regurgitated bloody vomit over the feet of Johnny Walker Black, who still hadn't woken up, dreaming of well-endowed horses stampeding over him.

Percy's hips thrust and thrust. His knees scraped divots into the soft earth, but he felt no pain. Sweat dripped off his forehead into the mouth of Mary-Jo, which gave an added eroticism to the lusty thrusting.

"Oh yeah, baby," he uttered through gritting molars. "You like it now, dontcha? Got a headache now? Mother coming to visit? On the rag? What excuse you got now? Ain't no excuses, bitch. Percy's gettin' what's rightfully his!"

Spanky sat in the dirt, legs splayed out in front of him like a kid playing in a sandbox. His shoulders sagged as blood and saliva and threads of vomit slipped from his drooping lower lip. He watched Percy's misogynistic rape and tried to keep his stomach from fomenting another coup d'état. Or coup d'stomach.

"Gonna git my baby in you! Percy's baby is good enough for a dead slut mommy! Now you getting' my genetics ... callin' me defective and dysfunctional and deranged—hell, I'm givin' you twins, bitch!"

Percy the necrophiliac (not a legitimate job description according to various democratic systems of government, though all forms of totalitarianism have given necrophiliacs a place in their societies ... God bless fascist states ... lovers of true freedom) spent his load inside the cooling vagina of Mary-Jo, her multiple labial and clit piercings warmed by the friction to become ball

bearings of fire. (Not an eBook, but love the title!)

Percy rolled his over-heated body off the corpse, breath heaving, residual jism slathering the head of his pee-pee.

He held a palm against his heart and sighed out, “Damn, that was nice. That was a good one. I really felt alive there.” He turned his eyes to Mary-Jo’s ear, peeled a glued strand of her bottle-dyed hair off her eyeball. “Thank you, baby. That make you feel good? Don’t worry about all that shit I was saying, that’s just dirty talk. Makes a sweet fuck sweeter, don’t it?”

Spanky felt a punch hit his stomach. He heaved and splashed vomit into his crotch. Between exhausted breaths, he managed to say, “That’s ... that’s ... you’re disgusting ... you’re sick ... you need help.”

Percy dusted off his knees and slid his pants back up. Zipped up while smiling down at his most recent corpse-fuck.

“Hey, I provide a service.” He massaged the curled snail beneath his zipper. “If ghosts exist, and this sweetheart is floating over her body, then she just saw—and maybe felt—the ole Percinator give her one last good time before she ascended into the Great Beyond.” His penis shrunk away from his massage, empty of all fluids, wanting to nest. “If there ain’t no ghosts, then fuck it. The dead can’t feel it, and don’t know what I’m doing. We’re all just meat when we’re dead, anyway. Everything alive is just walking meat. If it wasn’t, we wouldn’t eat hamburgers. Is it illegal or immoral to fuck a burger?”

(A question no philosopher has yet dared to touch.)

Spanky dipped his head between his raised knees, let spit spool out of his mouth, waved away Percy’s logic. “Just shut up ... please. Go. Go back to wherever you came from. Hope I never see you again.”

Hands on hips, Percy strolled around the devastation, kicking twisted car parts, inhaling a chest full of night as he looked at the laughing moon.

“Y’don’t gotta be a jerk about it. I take advantage of an opportunity when it comes along—just like you.” He strode to the edge of the cornfield, smiled back at Spanky. “You and I are very similar, my friend—practically twins. But no one writes pretty little novels about me.”

And now for the punchline ...

“Wait,” Spanky called, stopping Percy from vanishing into the corn. “What do we do with all these people? Some of them are still alive.” The vampire patted his roiling stomach, inhaled



deeply and swallowed, keeping down any potential bile from rising. “I’m just not that hungry anymore. Should we help them or something? I mean, do necrophiliacs—or vampires, for that matter—ever help people?”

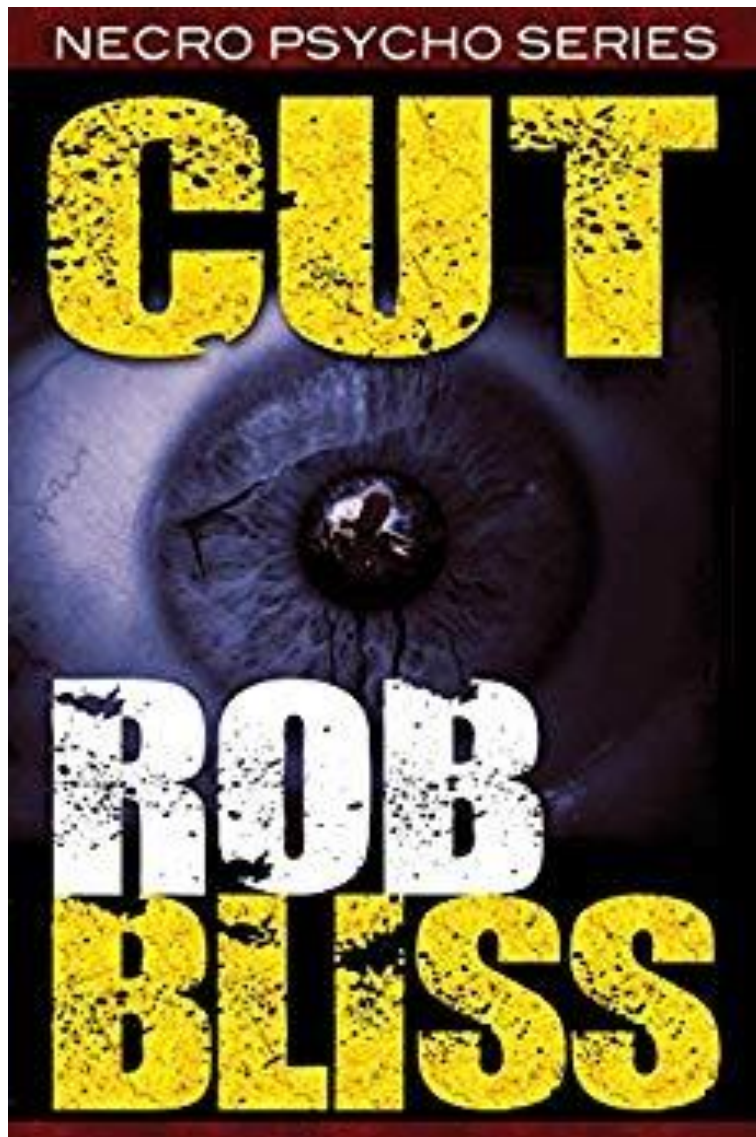
(Another question no philosopher has yet to spoil a synapse on.)

Percy glanced back, saw Ella-May (dot dot dot), the fifteen-year-old way hot sister sit up in the backseat of the car. Bottles clattered on the floorboard as she climbed out of her cavern. Dizzy, she put a hand to her cold forehead. A cool night breeze made her blink as she tried to focus on the scene of midnight destruction.

“Oh yeah, forgot about her,” Percy said to himself. He brushed Spanky’s dilemma away with the back of his hand. “Don’t worry ... the paedophile should be along any minute ... let him take all the blame.”

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## THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

### Part Thirty-Nine

Turhan Mot stood at the doorway of the cell that held Lacey and Carter Ward. The dissolute Mokem Bet stood next to him. Both men were gloating over their catch. Ward could see nothing of the two men but their silhouettes.

That was sufficient. With their silhouettes, and the sounds of their voices, Ward recognized the men instantly.

Though exhausted, not only in body, but also spirit and mind, Ward leaped from the floor of the cage and hurled himself at the men. Mokem Bet stepped between Ward and Turhan Mot. With the blow of a sledgehammer, he brought his fist down on the back of Carter Ward's head. Ward dropped to the deck like a bag of uncooked hamburger.

Mokem Bet picked Ward up with his hands under Ward's armpits. He shook Ward until his eyes blinked open. He kicked Ward hard in the groin, provoking a grunt from the man. Ward slumped in Mokem Bet's grasp.

"Oh, no yeh don't!" Mokem Bet shouted into Ward's ear. "Yew cost me some serious chump back there aways. I'm takin' it straight outta yer hide."

"Stop it! STOP IT!" Lacey screamed. "You're killing him!"

"Our friend makes a point," Turhan Mot broke in. "Horst Dal wants to meet this man while the man is still breathing."

Mokem Bet turned his head to look at Turhan Mot. With disgust, he dropped Ward to the deck.

"We observe of the man that he quite unconscious, due to your ministrations," Turhan Mot remarked. "This should be a most opportune moment to secure him against any possible attempts to escape."

"Yes," Mokem Bet admitted.

When he roused himself to consciousness any minutes later, Carter Ward found himself shackled, wrist and ankle, to the deck.

Wherever it was they had gone to, they had arrived there. The ship was still, the engines, silent.

Moments later, the soft pad of sandals upon a metal deck came echoing down the hall. Yellow shafts of light from a dozen hand held flashlights jittered through the darkness.

"Right here. This is the cage."

Silhouettes of human forms crowded around the gate. The gate flew open.

“Yeah. That’s him. And the chick. Bring her, too.”

“Awrite, boss. Will dew,”

“You watch that guy. Fucker’s deadly dangerous. Blindfold him. Keep yer eyes on `im. Doncha once let his hands free. You keep his ankles shackled, too.”

“Okay, boss.”

Ward felt himself jerked to his feet. The cold steel shackles cut into his flesh. Painful, but Ward made not a single sound of protest. Surreptitiously he tested the lengths of his various restraints. Wrists, pinned together behind his back, and linked to the chain that circled his waist. Ankles, chained together, with two feet of play. A steel collar encircled his neck, making it difficult for Ward to swallow, and from that collar there depended a chain. At the opposite end of that chain was a handler who guided Ward’s step by jerking on the chain. Ward stumbled frequently, provoking a round of laughter from his captors each time he did.

Were it not for the chains and shackles, Ward would have been wearing nothing at all. As it was, the restraints were hardly sufficient to protect Ward’s modesty, had Carter Ward any modesty to protect. But he did not. Raised in the brutal wards of Mars, he never had the chance to develop any sense of modesty, and any nascent impulses in that direction were instantly and brutally suppressed. Ward, he had it pounded into his head daily, was there solely to earn his keep. Modesty of any sort only got in the way.

So, though he was blindfolded, shackled and naked, Ward strode forward, he knew not where, with his head high and his shoulders straight.

Lacey walked beside Ward, not nearly so self-assured. But occasionally her shoulder brushed against Ward’s arm. Though he was bound tightly, his arm radiated heat, and with that heat, a confidence that quite took her breath away. She was overcome with the impulse to imitate that confidence. She could not articulate it to herself, what it was she was feeling. But, desperate not to disappoint Ward, she did her best to stride with the same pride that Ward demonstrated, as he was dragged and half pushed through the rough-hewn halls of this place, wherever this place may be.

So it was that when Ward and Lacey were ushered into the quarters that Horst Dal had so generously loaned out to Turhan Mot, they both strode into the receiving room with their chins high.

Turhan Mot was first enraged. Then he was humiliated.

The whole point of this exercise was to humiliate Carter Ward himself. Not to be humiliated by him. To bring the man low. To ruin that man’s overweening pride.

That man—that loathsome, that odious man—had twisted Turhan Mot’s cunning, and beat him with it. Over and over. Again and again. Damn him.

Turhan’s Mot’s flesh—normally a shocking and painful white, mottled with blue shadows and rills of embedded steel beads—turned positively purple with rage. A good thing it was, he decided at that moment, to have this Carter Ward blindfolded. No good would come of letting the man see how deeply he had offended Turhan Mot.

And that thought provoked another. If his own responses to Carter Ward’s arrogant mien were humiliation and anger, how much more furiously would he, Horst Dal, take the insult? Giving no outward indication of his passing thoughts, Turhan Mot felt a cold breath of air chill the back of his neck, as he came to appreciate how very narrowly he had avoided insulting Horst Dal, and suffering a most painful death at the hands of the old pirate.

No. Clearly, this would not do. Carter Ward could not be introduced to the Great Horst Dal, not in this condition.

“This man stinks,” he said to Mokem Bet, loudly enough that Ward, and everyone else in Turhan Mot’s suite, could hear.

“Have this man cleaned and bathed. Groom him, that he may be presented to the Great Horst Dal without insult.”

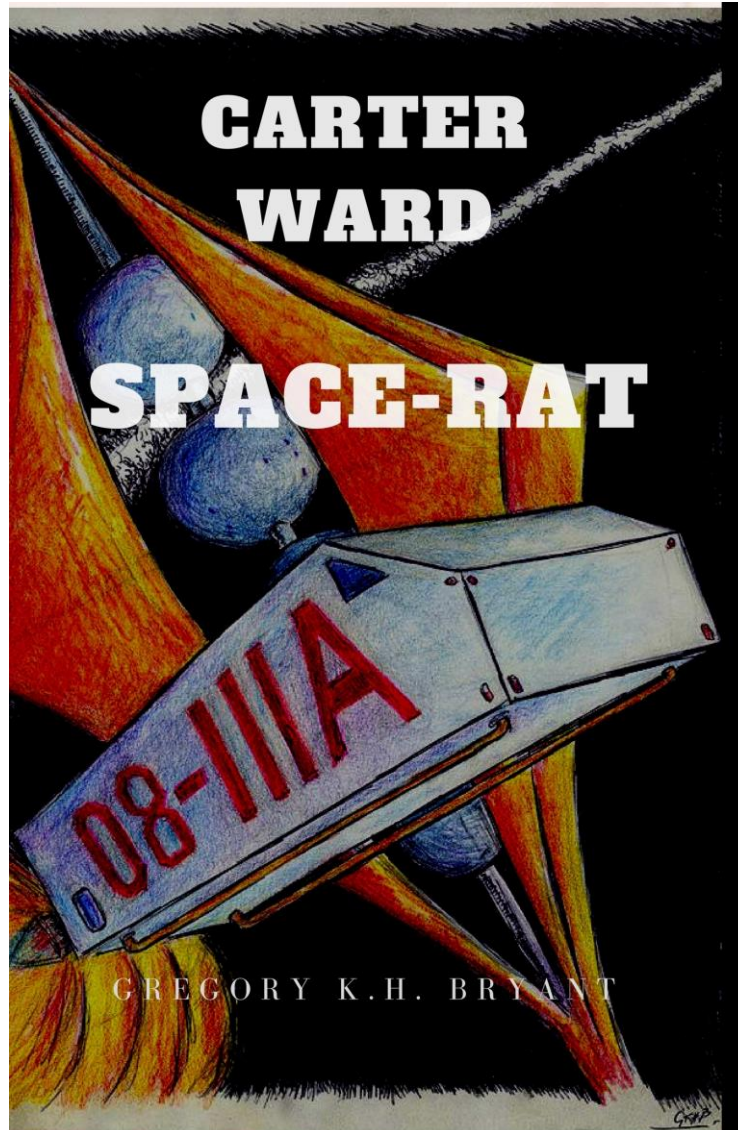
Mokem Bet gave his head a curt nod. He presented a most horrific image, a monstrous caricature of a man. A long gash from some ancient battle cut diagonally through his face, from jaw to forehead, slashing through the bridge of his nose along the way. What few teeth were yet left in his head were brown, black and broken. His greasy hair lay in undisciplined piles upon his head, frequently spilling over the sides of his head and into his face. He’d lost both ears, both in the same battle, the Battle of IPS-3.

Placing his hand on Carter Ward’s shoulder, he gave the man a shove. Then, with a gesture tossed at one of Turhan Mot’s concubines, he had her lead Lacey out of the suite behind him and Ward.

So it was that when they were at last presented to Horst Dal, Carter Ward and Lacey were quite presentable, indeed.

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

Now available from Schlock! Publications: [\*Carter Ward—Space Rat\*](#) by Gregory KH Bryant.



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## THE LOST WORLD by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

### Chapter XV: "Our Eyes have seen Great Wonders"

I write this from day to day, but I trust that before I come to the end of it, I may be able to say that the light shines, at last, through our clouds. We are held here with no clear means of making our escape, and bitterly we chafe against it. Yet, I can well imagine that the day may come when we may be glad that we were kept, against our will, to see something more of the wonders of this singular place, and of the creatures who inhabit it.

The victory of the Indians and the annihilation of the ape-men, marked the turning point of our fortunes. From then onwards, we were in truth masters of the plateau, for the natives looked upon us with a mixture of fear and gratitude, since by our strange powers we had aided them to destroy their hereditary foe. For their own sakes they would, perhaps, be glad to see the departure of such formidable and incalculable people, but they have not themselves suggested any way by which we may reach the plains below. There had been, so far as we could follow their signs, a tunnel by which the place could be approached, the lower exit of which we had seen from below. By this, no doubt, both ape-men and Indians had at different epochs reached the top, and Maple White with his companion had taken the same way. Only the year before, however, there had been a terrific earthquake, and the upper end of the tunnel had fallen in and completely disappeared. The Indians now could only shake their heads and shrug their shoulders when we expressed by signs our desire to descend. It may be that they cannot, but it may also be that they will not, help us to get away.

At the end of the victorious campaign the surviving ape-folk were driven across the plateau (their wailings were horrible) and established in the neighbourhood of the Indian caves, where they would, from now onwards, be a servile race under the eyes of their masters. It was a rude, raw, primeval version of the Jews in Babylon or the Israelites in Egypt. At night we could hear from amid the trees the long-drawn cry, as some primitive Ezekiel mourned for fallen greatness and recalled the departed glories of Ape Town. Hewers of wood and drawers of water, such were they from now onwards.

We had returned across the plateau with our allies two days after the battle, and made our camp at the foot of their cliffs. They would have had us share their caves with them, but Lord John would by no means consent to it considering that to do so would put us in their power if they were treacherously disposed. We kept our independence, therefore, and had our weapons ready for any emergency, while preserving the most friendly relations. We also continually visited their caves, which were most remarkable places, though whether made by man or by Nature we have never been able to determine. They were all on the one stratum, hollowed out of some soft rock which lay between the volcanic basalt forming the ruddy cliffs above them, and the hard granite which formed their base.

The openings were about eighty feet above the ground, and were led up to by long stone stairs, so narrow and steep that no large animal could mount them. Inside they were warm and dry, running in straight passages of varying length into the side of the hill, with smooth grey walls decorated with many excellent pictures done with charred sticks and representing the various

animals of the plateau. If every living thing were swept from the country the future explorer would find upon the walls of these caves ample evidence of the strange fauna—the dinosaurs, iguanodons, and fish lizards—which had lived so recently upon earth.

Since we had learned that the huge iguanodons were kept as tame herds by their owners, and were simply walking meat-stores, we had conceived that man, even with his primitive weapons, had established his ascendancy upon the plateau. We were soon to discover that it was not so, and that he was still there upon tolerance.

It was on the third day after our forming our camp near the Indian caves that the tragedy occurred. Challenger and Summerlee had gone off together that day to the lake where some of the natives, under their direction, were engaged in harpooning specimens of the great lizards. Lord John and I had remained in our camp, while a number of the Indians were scattered about upon the grassy slope in front of the caves engaged in different ways. Suddenly there was a shrill cry of alarm, with the word “Stoa” resounding from a hundred tongues. From every side men, women, and children were rushing wildly for shelter, swarming up the staircases and into the caves in a mad stampede.

Looking up, we could see them waving their arms from the rocks above and beckoning to us to join them in their refuge. We had both seized our magazine rifles and ran out to see what the danger could be. Suddenly from the near belt of trees there broke forth a group of twelve or fifteen Indians, running for their lives, and at their very heels two of those frightful monsters which had disturbed our camp and pursued me upon my solitary journey. In shape they were like horrible toads, and moved in a succession of springs, but in size they were of an incredible bulk, larger than the largest elephant. We had never before seen them save at night, and indeed they are nocturnal animals save when disturbed in their lairs, as these had been. We now stood amazed at the sight, for their blotched and warty skins were of a curious fish-like iridescence, and the sunlight struck them with an ever-varying rainbow bloom as they moved.

We had little time to watch them, however, for in an instant they had overtaken the fugitives and were making a dire slaughter among them. Their method was to fall forward with their full weight upon each in turn, leaving him crushed and mangled, to bound on after the others. The wretched Indians screamed with terror, but were helpless, run as they would, before the relentless purpose and horrible activity of these monstrous creatures. One after another they went down, and there were not half-a-dozen surviving by the time my companion and I could come to their help. But our aid was of little avail and only involved us in the same peril. At the range of a couple of hundred yards we emptied our magazines, firing bullet after bullet into the beasts, but with no more effect than if we were pelting them with pellets of paper. Their slow reptilian natures cared nothing for wounds, and the springs of their lives, with no special brain centre but scattered throughout their spinal cords, could not be tapped by any modern weapons. The most that we could do was to check their progress by distracting their attention with the flash and roar of our guns, and so to give both the natives and ourselves time to reach the steps which led to safety. But where the conical explosive bullets of the twentieth century were of no avail, the poisoned arrows of the natives, dipped in the juice of strophanthus and steeped afterwards in decayed carrion, could succeed. Such arrows were of little avail to the hunter who attacked the beast, because their action in that torpid circulation was slow, and before its powers failed it



could certainly overtake and slay its assailant. But now, as the two monsters hounded us to the very foot of the stairs, a drift of darts came whistling from every chink in the cliff above them. In a minute they were feathered with them, and yet with no sign of pain they clawed and slobbered with impotent rage at the steps which would lead them to their victims, mounting clumsily up for a few yards and then sliding down again to the ground. But at last the poison worked. One of them gave a deep rumbling groan and dropped his huge squat head on to the earth. The other bounded round in an eccentric circle with shrill, wailing cries, and then lying down writhed in agony for some minutes before it also stiffened and lay still. With yells of triumph the Indians came flocking down from their caves and danced a frenzied dance of victory round the dead bodies, in mad joy that two more of the most dangerous of all their enemies had been slain. That night they cut up and removed the bodies, not to eat—for the poison was still active—but lest they should breed a pestilence. The great reptilian hearts, however, each as large as a cushion, still lay there, beating slowly and steadily, with a gentle rise and fall, in horrible independent life. It was only upon the third day that the ganglia ran down and the dreadful things were still.

Some day, when I have a better desk than a meat-tin and more helpful tools than a worn stub of pencil and a last, tattered note-book, I will write some fuller account of the Accala Indians—of our life amongst them, and of the glimpses which we had of the strange conditions of wondrous Maple White Land. Memory, at least, will never fail me, for so long as the breath of life is in me, every hour and every action of that period will stand out as hard and clear as do the first strange happenings of our childhood. No new impressions could efface those which are so deeply cut. When the time comes I will describe that wondrous moonlit night upon the great lake when a young ichthyosaurus—a strange creature, half seal, half fish, to look at, with bone-covered eyes on each side of his snout, and a third eye fixed upon the top of his head—was entangled in an Indian net, and nearly upset our canoe before we towed it ashore; the same night that a green water-snake shot out from the rushes and carried off in its coils the steersman of Challenger's canoe. I will tell, too, of the great nocturnal white thing—to this day we do not know whether it was beast or reptile—which lived in a vile swamp to the east of the lake, and flitted about with a faint phosphorescent glimmer in the darkness. The Indians were so terrified at it that they would not go near the place, and, though we twice made expeditions and saw it each time, we could not make our way through the deep marsh in which it lived. I can only say that it seemed to be larger than a cow and had the strangest musky odour. I will tell also of the huge bird which chased Challenger to the shelter of the rocks one day—a great running bird, far taller than an ostrich, with a vulture-like neck and cruel head which made it a walking death. As Challenger climbed to safety one dart of that savage curving beak shore off the heel of his boot as if it had been cut with a chisel. This time at least modern weapons prevailed and the great creature, twelve feet from head to foot—phororachus its name, according to our panting but exultant Professor—went down before Lord Roxton's rifle in a flurry of waving feathers and kicking limbs, with two remorseless yellow eyes glaring up from the midst of it. May I live to see that flattened vicious skull in its own niche amid the trophies of the Albany. Finally, I will assuredly give some account of the toxodon, the giant ten-foot guinea pig, with projecting chisel teeth, which we killed as it drank in the grey of the morning by the side of the lake.

All this I shall some day write at fuller length, and amidst these more stirring days I would tenderly sketch in these lovely summer evenings, when with the deep blue sky above us we lay in good comradeship among the long grasses by the wood and marvelled at the strange fowl that

swept over us and the quaint new creatures which crept from their burrows to watch us, while above us the boughs of the bushes were heavy with luscious fruit, and below us strange and lovely flowers peeped at us from among the herbage; or those long moonlit nights when we lay out upon the shimmering surface of the great lake and watched with wonder and awe the huge circles rippling out from the sudden splash of some fantastic monster; or the greenish gleam, far down in the deep water, of some strange creature upon the confines of darkness. These are the scenes which my mind and my pen will dwell upon in every detail at some future day.

But, you will ask, why these experiences and why this delay, when you and your comrades should have been occupied day and night in the devising of some means by which you could return to the outer world? My answer is, that there was not one of us who was not working for this end, but that our work had been in vain. One fact we had very speedily discovered: The Indians would do nothing to help us. In every other way they were our friends—one might almost say our devoted slaves—but when it was suggested that they should help us to make and carry a plank which would bridge the chasm, or when we wished to get from them thongs of leather or liana to weave ropes which might help us, we were met by a good-humoured, but an invincible, refusal. They would smile, twinkle their eyes, shake their heads, and there was the end of it. Even the old chief met us with the same obstinate denial, and it was only Maretas, the youngster whom we had saved, who looked wistfully at us and told us by his gestures that he was grieved for our thwarted wishes. Ever since their crowning triumph with the ape-men they looked upon us as supermen, who bore victory in the tubes of strange weapons, and they believed that so long as we remained with them good fortune would be theirs. A little red-skinned wife and a cave of our own were freely offered to each of us if we would but forget our own people and dwell forever upon the plateau. So far all had been kindly, however far apart our desires might be; but we felt well assured that our actual plans of a descent must be kept secret, for we had reason to fear that at the last they might try to hold us by force.

In spite of the danger from dinosaurs (which is not great save at night, for, as I may have said before, they are mostly nocturnal in their habits) I have twice in the last three weeks been over to our old camp in order to see our negro who still kept watch and ward below the cliff. My eyes strained eagerly across the great plain in the hope of seeing afar off the help for which we had prayed. But the long cactus-strewn levels still stretched away, empty and bare, to the distant line of the cane-brake.

“They will soon come now, Massa Malone. Before another week pass Indian come back and bring rope and fetch you down.” Such was the cheery cry of our excellent Zambo.

I had one strange experience as I came from this second visit which had involved my being away for a night from my companions. I was returning along the well-remembered route, and had reached a spot within a mile or so of the marsh of the pterodactyls, when I saw an extraordinary object approaching me. It was a man who walked inside a framework made of bent canes so that he was enclosed on all sides in a bell-shaped cage. As I drew nearer I was more amazed still to see that it was Lord John Roxton. When he saw me he slipped from under his curious protection and came towards me laughing, and yet, as I thought, with some confusion in his manner.

“Well, young fellah,” said he, “who would have thought of meetin’ you up here?”

“What in the world are you doing?” I asked.

“Visitin’ my friends, the pterodactyls,” said he.

“But why?”

“Interestin’ beasts, don’t you think? But unsociable! Nasty rude ways with strangers, as you may remember. So I rigged this framework which keeps them from bein’ too pressin’ in their attentions.”

“But what do you want in the swamp?”

He looked at me with a very questioning eye, and I read hesitation in his face.

“Don’t you think other people besides Professors can want to know things?” he said at last. “I’m studyin’ the pretty dears. That’s enough for you.”

“No offence,” said I.

His good-humour returned and he laughed.

“No offense, young fellah. I’m goin’ to get a young devil chick for Challenger. That’s one of my jobs. No, I don’t want your company. I’m safe in this cage, and you are not. So long, and I’ll be back in camp by night-fall.”

He turned away and I left him wandering on through the wood with his extraordinary cage around him.

If Lord John’s behaviour at this time was strange, that of Challenger was more so. I may say that he seemed to possess an extraordinary fascination for the Indian women, and that he always carried a large spreading palm branch with which he beat them off as if they were flies, when their attentions became too pressing. To see him walking like a comic opera Sultan, with this badge of authority in his hand, his black beard bristling in front of him, his toes pointing at each step, and a train of wide-eyed Indian girls behind him, clad in their slender drapery of bark cloth, is one of the most grotesque of all the pictures which I will carry back with me. As to Summerlee, he was absorbed in the insect and bird life of the plateau, and spent his whole time (save that considerable portion which was devoted to abusing Challenger for not getting us out of our difficulties) in cleaning and mounting his specimens.

Challenger had been in the habit of walking off by himself every morning and returning from time to time with looks of portentous solemnity, as one who bears the full weight of a great enterprise upon his shoulders. One day, palm branch in hand, and his crowd of adoring devotees behind him, he led us down to his hidden work-shop and took us into the secret of his plans.

The place was a small clearing in the centre of a palm grove. In this was one of those boiling

mud geysers which I have already described. Around its edge were scattered a number of leathern thongs cut from iguanodon hide, and a large collapsed membrane which proved to be the dried and scraped stomach of one of the great fish lizards from the lake. This huge sack had been sewn up at one end and only a small orifice left at the other. Into this opening several bamboo canes had been inserted and the other ends of these canes were in contact with conical clay funnels which collected the gas bubbling up through the mud of the geyser. Soon the flaccid organ began to slowly expand and show such a tendency to upward movements that Challenger fastened the cords which held it to the trunks of the surrounding trees. In half an hour a good-sized gas-bag had been formed, and the jerking and straining upon the thongs showed that it was capable of considerable lift. Challenger, like a glad father in the presence of his first-born, stood smiling and stroking his beard, in silent, self-satisfied content as he gazed at the creation of his brain. It was Summerlee who first broke the silence.

“You don’t mean us to go up in that thing, Challenger?” said he, in an acid voice.

“I mean, my dear Summerlee, to give you such a demonstration of its powers that after seeing it you will, I am sure, have no hesitation in trusting yourself to it.”

“You can put it right out of your head now, at once,” said Summerlee with decision, “nothing on earth would induce me to commit such a folly. Lord John, I trust that you will not countenance such madness?”

“Dooood ingenious, I call it,” said our peer. “I’d like to see how it works.”

“So you shall,” said Challenger. “For some days I have exerted my whole brain force upon the problem of how we shall descend from these cliffs. We have satisfied ourselves that we cannot climb down and that there is no tunnel. We are also unable to construct any kind of bridge which may take us back to the pinnacle from which we came. How then shall I find a means to convey us? Some little time ago I had remarked to our young friend here that free hydrogen was evolved from the geyser. The idea of a balloon naturally followed. I was, I will admit, somewhat baffled by the difficulty of discovering an envelope to contain the gas, but the contemplation of the immense entrails of these reptiles supplied me with a solution to the problem. Behold the result!”

He put one hand in the front of his ragged jacket and pointed proudly with the other.

By this time the gas-bag had swollen to a goodly rotundity and was jerking strongly upon its lashings.

“Midsummer madness!” snorted Summerlee.

Lord John was delighted with the whole idea. “Clever old dear, ain’t he?” he whispered to me, and then louder to Challenger. “What about a car?”

“The car will be my next care. I have already planned how it is to be made and attached. Meanwhile I will simply show you how capable my apparatus is of supporting the weight of each of us.”

“All of us, surely?”

“No, it is part of my plan that each in turn shall descend as in a parachute, and the balloon be drawn back by means which I shall have no difficulty in perfecting. If it will support the weight of one and let him gently down, it will have done all that is required of it. I will now show you its capacity in that direction.”

He brought out a lump of basalt of a considerable size, constructed in the middle so that a cord could be easily attached to it. This cord was the one which we had brought with us on to the plateau after we had used it for climbing the pinnacle. It was over a hundred feet long, and though it was thin it was very strong. He had prepared a sort of collar of leather with many straps depending from it. This collar was placed over the dome of the balloon, and the hanging thongs were gathered together below, so that the pressure of any weight would be diffused over a considerable surface. Then the lump of basalt was fastened to the thongs, and the rope was allowed to hang from the end of it, being passed three times round the Professor’s arm.

“I will now,” said Challenger, with a smile of pleased anticipation, “demonstrate the carrying power of my balloon.” As he said so he cut with a knife the various lashings that held it.

Never was our expedition in more imminent danger of complete annihilation. The inflated membrane shot up with frightful velocity into the air. In an instant Challenger was pulled off his feet and dragged after it. I had just time to throw my arms round his ascending waist when I was myself whipped up into the air. Lord John had me with a rat-trap grip round the legs, but I felt that he also was coming off the ground. For a moment I had a vision of four adventurers floating like a string of sausages over the land that they had explored. But, happily, there were limits to the strain which the rope would stand, though none apparently to the lifting powers of this infernal machine. There was a sharp crack, and we were in a heap upon the ground with coils of rope all over us. When we were able to stagger to our feet we saw far off in the deep blue sky one dark spot where the lump of basalt was speeding upon its way.

“Splendid!” cried the undaunted Challenger, rubbing his injured arm. “A most thorough and satisfactory demonstration! I could not have anticipated such a success. Within a week, gentlemen, I promise that a second balloon will be prepared, and that you can count upon taking in safety and comfort the first stage of our homeward journey.” So far I have written each of the foregoing events as it occurred. Now I am rounding off my narrative from the old camp, where Zambo has waited so long, with all our difficulties and dangers left like a dream behind us upon the summit of those vast ruddy crags which tower above our heads. We have descended in safety, though in a most unexpected fashion, and all is well with us. In six weeks or two months we shall be in London, and it is possible that this letter may not reach you much earlier than we do ourselves. Already our hearts yearn and our spirits fly towards the great mother city which holds so much that is dear to us.

It was on the very evening of our perilous adventure with Challenger’s home-made balloon that the change came in our fortunes. I have said that the one person from whom we had had some sign of sympathy in our attempts to get away was the young chief whom we had rescued. He

alone had no desire to hold us against our will in a strange land. He had told us as much by his expressive language of signs. That evening, after dusk, he came down to our little camp, handed me (for some reason he had always shown his attentions to me, perhaps because I was the one who was nearest his age) a small roll of the bark of a tree, and then pointing solemnly up at the row of caves above him, he had put his finger to his lips as a sign of secrecy and had stolen back again to his people.

I took the slip of bark to the firelight and we examined it together. It was about a foot square, and on the inner side there was a singular arrangement of lines, which I here reproduce:



They were neatly done in charcoal upon the white surface, and looked to me at first sight like some sort of rough musical score.

“Whatever it is, I can swear that it is of importance to us,” said I. “I could read that on his face as he gave it.”

“Unless we have come upon a primitive practical joker,” Summerlee suggested, “which I should think would be one of the most elementary developments of man.”

“It is clearly some sort of script,” said Challenger.

“Looks like a guinea puzzle competition,” remarked Lord John, craning his neck to have a look at it. Then suddenly he stretched out his hand and seized the puzzle.

“By George!” he cried, “I believe I’ve got it. The boy guessed right the very first time. See here! How many marks are on that paper? Eighteen. Well, if you come to think of it there are eighteen cave openings on the hill-side above us.”

“He pointed up to the caves when he gave it to me,” said I.

“Well, that settles it. This is a chart of the caves. What! Eighteen of them all in a row, some short, some deep, some branching, same as we saw them. It’s a map, and here’s a cross on it. What’s the cross for? It is placed to mark one that is much deeper than the others.”

“One that goes through,” I cried.

“I believe our young friend has read the riddle,” said Challenger. “If the cave does not go

through I do not understand why this person, who has every reason to mean us well, should have drawn our attention to it. But if it does go through and comes out at the corresponding point on the other side, we should not have more than a hundred feet to descend.”

“A hundred feet!” grumbled Summerlee.

“Well, our rope is still more than a hundred feet long,” I cried. “Surely we could get down.”

“How about the Indians in the cave?” Summerlee objected.

“There are no Indians in any of the caves above our heads,” said I. “They are all used as barns and store-houses. Why should we not go up now at once and spy out the land?”

There is a dry bituminous wood upon the plateau—a species of araucaria, according to our botanist—which is always used by the Indians for torches. Each of us picked up a faggot of this, and we made our way up weed-covered steps to the particular cave which was marked in the drawing. It was, as I had said, empty, save for a great number of enormous bats, which flapped round our heads as we advanced into it. As we had no desire to draw the attention of the Indians to our proceedings, we stumbled along in the dark until we had gone round several curves and penetrated a considerable distance into the cavern. Then, at last, we lit our torches. It was a beautiful dry tunnel with smooth grey walls covered with native symbols, a curved roof which arched over our heads, and white glistening sand beneath our feet. We hurried eagerly along it until, with a deep groan of bitter disappointment, we were brought to a halt. A sheer wall of rock had appeared before us, with no chink through which a mouse could have slipped. There was no escape for us there.

We stood with bitter hearts staring at this unexpected obstacle. It was not the result of any convulsion, as in the case of the ascending tunnel. The end wall was exactly like the side ones. It was, and had always been, a cul-de-sac.

“Never mind, my friends,” said the indomitable Challenger. “You have still my firm promise of a balloon.”

Summerlee groaned.

“Can we be in the wrong cave?” I suggested.

“No use, young fellah,” said Lord John, with his finger on the chart. “Seventeen from the right and second from the left. This is the cave sure enough.”

I looked at the mark to which his finger pointed, and I gave a sudden cry of joy.

“I believe I have it! Follow me! Follow me!”

I hurried back along the way we had come, my torch in my hand. “Here,” said I, pointing to some matches upon the ground, “is where we lit up.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, it is marked as a forked cave, and in the darkness we passed the fork before the torches were lit. On the right side as we go out we should find the longer arm.”

It was as I had said. We had not gone thirty yards before a great black opening loomed in the wall. We turned into it to find that we were in a much larger passage than before. Along it we hurried in breathless impatience for many hundreds of yards. Then, suddenly, in the black darkness of the arch in front of us we saw a gleam of dark red light. We stared in amazement. A sheet of steady flame seemed to cross the passage and to bar our way. We hastened towards it. No sound, no heat, no movement came from it, but still the great luminous curtain glowed before us, silvering all the cave and turning the sand to powdered jewels, until as we drew closer it discovered a circular edge.

“The moon, by George!” cried Lord John. “We are through, boys! We are through!”

It was indeed the full moon which shone straight down the aperture which opened upon the cliffs. It was a small rift, not larger than a window, but it was enough for all our purposes. As we craned our necks through it we could see that the descent was not a very difficult one, and that the level ground was no very great way below us. It was no wonder that from below we had not observed the place, as the cliffs curved overhead and an ascent at the spot would have seemed so impossible as to discourage close inspection. We satisfied ourselves that with the help of our rope we could find our way down, and then returned, rejoicing, to our camp to make our preparations for the next evening.

What we did we had to do quickly and secretly, since even at this last hour the Indians might hold us back. Our stores we would leave behind us, save only our guns and cartridges. But Challenger had some unwieldy stuff which he ardently desired to take with him, and one particular package, of which I may not speak, which gave us more labour than any. Slowly the day passed, but when the darkness fell we were ready for our departure. With much labour we got our things up the steps, and then, looking back, took one last long survey of that strange land, soon I fear to be vulgarized, the prey of hunter and prospector, but to each of us a dreamland of glamour and romance, a land where we had dared much, suffered much, and learned much—OUR land, as we shall ever fondly call it. Along upon our left the neighbouring caves each threw out its ruddy cheery firelight into the gloom. From the slope below us rose the voices of the Indians as they laughed and sang. Beyond was the long sweep of the woods, and in the centre, shimmering vaguely through the gloom, was the great lake, the mother of strange monsters. Even as we looked a high whickering cry, the call of some weird animal, rang clear out of the darkness. It was the very voice of Maple White Land bidding us good-bye. We turned and plunged into the cave which led to home.

Two hours later, we, our packages, and all we owned, were at the foot of the cliff. Save for Challenger’s luggage we had never a difficulty. Leaving it all where we descended, we started at once for Zambo’s camp. In the early morning we approached it, but only to find, to our amazement, not one fire but a dozen upon the plain. The rescue party had arrived. There were



twenty Indians from the river, with stakes, ropes, and all that could be useful for bridging the chasm. At least we shall have no difficulty now in carrying our packages, when to-morrow we begin to make our way back to the Amazon.

And so, in humble and thankful mood, I close this account. Our eyes have seen great wonders and our souls are chastened by what we have endured. Each is in his own way a better and deeper man. It may be that when we reach Para we shall stop to refit. If we do, this letter will be a mail ahead. If not, it will reach London on the very day that I do. In either case, my dear Mr. McArdle, I hope very soon to shake you by the hand.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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## THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

### Chapter XIX: The Madness of Olaf

Yolara threw her white arms high. From the mountainous tiers came a mighty sigh; a rippling ran through them. And upon the moment, before Yolara's arms fell, there issued, apparently from the air around us, a peal of sound that might have been the shouting of some playful god hurling great suns through the net of stars. It was like the deepest notes of all the organs in the world combined in one; summoning, majestic, cosmic!

It held within it the thunder of the spheres rolling through the infinite, the birth-song of suns made manifest in the womb of space; echoes of creation's supernal chord! It shook the body like a pulse from the heart of the universe—pulsed—and died away.

On its death came a blaring as of all the trumpets of conquering hosts since the first Pharaoh led his swarms—triumphal, compelling! Alexander's clamouring hosts, brazen-throated wolf-horns of Caesar's legions, blare of trumpets of Genghis Khan and his golden horde, clangour of the locust levies of Tamerlane, bugles of Napoleon's armies—war-shout of all earth's conquerors! And it died!

Fast upon it, a throbbing, muffled tumult of harp sounds, mellownesses of myriads of wood horns, the subdued sweet shrilling of multitudes of flutes, Pandean pipings—inviting, carrying with them the calling of waterfalls in the hidden places, rushing brooks and murmuring forest winds—calling, calling, languorous, lulling, dripping into the brain like the very honeyed essence of sound.

And after them a silence in which the memory of the music seemed to beat, to beat ever more faintly, through every quivering nerve.

From me all fear, all apprehension, had fled. In their place was nothing but joyous anticipation, a supernal freedom from even the shadow of the shadow of care or sorrow; not now did anything matter—Olaf or his haunted, hate-filled eyes; Throckmartin or his fate—nothing of pain, nothing of agony, nothing of striving nor endeavour nor despair in that wide outer world that had turned suddenly to a troubled dream.

Once more the first great note pealed out! Once more it died and from the clustered spheres a kaleidoscopic blaze shot as though drawn from the majestic sound itself. The many-coloured rays darted across the white waters and sought the face of the irised Veil. As they touched, it sparkled, flamed, wavered, and shook with fountains of prismatic colour.

The light increased—and in its intensity the silver air darkened. Faded into shadow that white mosaic of flower-crowned faces set in the amphitheatre of jet, and vast shadows dropped upon the high-flung tiers and shrouded them. But on the skirts of the rays the fretted stalls in which we sat with the fair-haired ones blazed out, iridescent, like jewels.

I was sensible of an acceleration of every pulse; a wild stimulation of every nerve. I felt myself

being lifted above the world—close to the threshold of the high gods—soon their essence and their power would stream out into me! I glanced at Larry. His eyes were—wild—with life!

I looked at Olaf—and in his face was none of this—only hate, and hate, and hate.

The peacock waves streamed out over the waters, cleaving the seeming darkness, a rainbow path of glory. And the Veil flashed as though all the rainbows that had ever shone were burning within it. Again the mighty sound pealed.

Into the centre of the Veil the light drew itself, grew into an intolerable brightness—and with a storm of tinklings, a tempest of crystalline notes, a tumult of tiny chimings, through it sped—the Shining One!

Straight down that radiant path, its high-flung plumes of feathery flame shimmering, its coruscating spirals whirling, its seven globes of seven colours shining above its glowing core, it raced toward us. The hurricane of bells of diamond glass were jubilant, joyous. I felt O’Keefe grip my arm; Yolara threw her white arms out in a welcoming gesture; I heard from the tier a sigh of rapture—and in it a poignant, wailing under-tone of agony!

Over the waters, down the light stream, to the end of the ivory pier, flew the Shining One. Through its crystal pizzicati drifted inarticulate murmurings—deadly sweet, stilling the heart and setting it leaping madly.

For a moment it paused, poised itself, and then came whirling down the flower path to its priestess, slowly, ever more slowly. It hovered for a moment between the woman and the dwarf, as though contemplating them; turned to her with its storm of tinklings softened, its murmurings infinitely caressing. Bent toward it, Yolara seemed to gather within herself pulsing waves of power; she was terrifying; gloriously, maddeningly evil; and as gloriously, maddeningly heavenly! Aphrodite and the Virgin! Tanith of the Carthaginians and St. Bride of the Isles! A queen of hell and a princess of heaven—in one!

Only for a moment did that which we had called the Dweller and which these named the Shining One, pause. It swept up the ramp to the dais, rested there, slowly turning, plumes and spirals lacing and unlacing, throbbing, pulsing. Now its nucleus grew plainer, stronger—human in a fashion, and all inhuman; neither man nor woman; neither god nor devil; subtly partaking of all. Nor could I doubt that whatever it was, within that shining nucleus was something sentient; something that had will and energy, and in some awful, supernormal fashion—intelligence!

Another trumpeting—a sound of stones opening—a long, low wail of utter anguish—something moved shadowy in the river of light, and slowly at first, then ever more rapidly, shapes swam through it. There were half a score of them—girls and youths, women and men. The Shining One poised itself, regarded them. They drew closer, and in the eyes of each and in their faces was the bud of that awful intermingling of emotions, of joy and sorrow, ecstasy and terror, that I had seen in full blossom on Throckmartin’s.

The Thing began again its murmurings—now infinitely caressing, coaxing—like the song of a

siren from some witched star! And the bell-sounds rang out—compellingly, calling—calling—calling—

I saw Olaf lean far out of his place; saw, half-consciously, at Lugur's signal, three of the dwarfs creep in and take places, unnoticed, behind him.

Now the first of the figures rushed upon the dais—and paused. It was the girl who had been brought before Yolara when the gnome named Songar was driven into the nothingness! With all the quickness of light a spiral of the Shining One stretched out and encircled her.

At its touch there was an infinitely dreadful shrinking and, it seemed, a simultaneous hurling of herself into its radiance. As it wrapped its swirls around her, permeated her—the crystal chorus burst forth—tumultuously; through and through her the radiance pulsed. Began then that infinitely dreadful, but infinitely glorious, rhythm they called the dance of the Shining One. And as the girl swirled within its sparkling mists another and another flew into its embrace, until, at last, the dais was an incredible vision; a mad star's Witches' Sabbath; an altar of white faces and bodies gleaming through living flame; transfused with rapture insupportable and horror that was hellish—and ever, radiant plumes and spirals expanding, the core of the Shining One waxed—growing greater—as it consumed, as it drew into and through itself the life-force of these lost ones!

So they spun, interlaced—and there began to pulse from them life, vitality, as though the very essence of nature was filling us. Dimly I recognized that what I was beholding was vampirism inconceivable! The banked tiers chanted. The mighty sounds pealed forth!

It was a Saturnalia of demigods!

Then, whirling, bell-notes storming, the Shining One withdrew slowly from the dais down the ramp, still embracing, still interwoven with those who had thrown themselves into its spirals. They drifted with it as though half-carried in dreadful dance; white faces sealed—forever—into that semblance of those who held within linked God and devil—I covered my eyes!

I heard a gasp from O'Keefe; opened my eyes and sought his; saw the wildness vanish from them as he strained forward. Olaf had leaned far out, and as he did so the dwarfs beside him caught him, and whether by design or through his own swift, involuntary movement, thrust him half into the Dweller's path. The Dweller paused in its gyrations—seemed to watch him. The Norseman's face was crimson, his eyes blazing. He threw himself back and, with one defiant shout, gripped one of the dwarfs about the middle and sent him hurtling through the air, straight at the radiant Thing! A whirling mass of legs and arms, the dwarf flew—then in mid-flight stopped as though some gigantic invisible hand had caught him, and—was dashed down upon the platform not a yard from the Shining One!

Like a broken spider he moved—feebly—once, twice. From the Dweller shot a shimmering tentacle—touched him—recoiled. Its crystal tinklings changed into an angry chiming. From all about—jewelled stalls and jet peak—came a sigh of incredulous horror.

Lugur leaped forward. On the instant Larry was over the low barrier between the pillars, rushing to the Norseman's side. And even as they ran there was another wild shout from Olaf, and he hurled himself out, straight at the throat of the Dweller!

But before he could touch the Shining One, now motionless—and never was the thing more horrible than then, with the purely human suggestion of surprise plain in its poise—Larry had struck him aside.

I tried to follow—and was held by Rador. He was trembling—but not with fear. In his face was incredulous hope, inexplicable eagerness.

“Wait!” he said. “Wait!”

The Shining One stretched out a slow spiral, and as it did so I saw the bravest thing man has ever witnessed. Instantly O'Keefe thrust himself between it and Olaf, pistol out. The tentacle touched him, and the dull blue of his robe flashed out into blinding, intense azure light. From the automatic in his gloved hand came three quick bursts of flame straight into the Thing. The Dweller drew back; the bell-sounds swelled.

Lugur paused, his hand darted up, and in it was one of the silver Keth cones. But before he could flash it upon the Norseman, Larry had unlooped his robe, thrown its fold over Olaf, and, holding him with one hand away from the Shining One, thrust with the other his pistol into the dwarf's stomach. His lips moved, but I could not hear what he said. But Lugur understood, for his hand dropped.

Now Yolara was there—all this had taken barely more than five seconds. She thrust herself between the three men and the Dweller. She spoke to it—and the wild buzzing died down; the gay crystal tinklings burst forth again. The Thing murmured to her—began to whirl—faster, faster—passed down the ivory pier, out upon the waters, bearing with it, meshed in its light, the sacrifices—swept on ever more swiftly, triumphantly and turning, turning, with its ghastly crew, vanished through the Veil!

Abruptly the polychromatic path snapped out. The silver light poured in upon us. From all the amphitheatre arose a clamour, a shouting. Marakinoff, his eyes staring, was leaning out, listening. Unrestrained now by Rador, I vaulted the wall and rushed forward. But not before I had heard the green dwarf murmur:

“There is something stronger than the Shining One! Two things—yea—a strong heart—and hate!”

Olaf, panting, eyes glazed, trembling, shrank beneath my hand.

“The devil that took my Helma!” I heard him whisper. “The Shining Devil!”

“Both these men,” Lugur was raging, “they shall dance with the Shining one. And this one, too.” He pointed at me malignantly.

“This man is mine,” said the priestess, and her voice was menacing. She rested her hand on Larry’s shoulder. “He shall not dance. No—nor his friend. I have told you I dare not for this one!” She pointed to Olaf.

“Neither this man, nor this,” said Larry, “shall be harmed. This is my word, Yolara!”

“Even so,” she answered quietly, “my lord!”

I saw Marakinoff stare at O’Keefe with a new and curiously speculative interest. Lugur’s eyes grew hellish; he raised his arms as though to strike her. Larry’s pistol prodded him rudely enough.

“No rough stuff now, kid!” said O’Keefe in English. The red dwarf quivered, turned—caught a robe from a priest standing by, and threw it over himself. The ladala, shouting, gesticulating, fighting with the soldiers, were jostling down from the tiers of jet.

“Come!” commanded Yolara—her eyes rested upon Larry. “Your heart is great, indeed—my lord!” she murmured; and her voice was very sweet. “Come!”

“This man comes with us, Yolara,” said O’Keefe pointing to Olaf.

“Bring him,” she said. “Bring him—only tell him to look no more upon me as before!” she added fiercely.

Beside her the three of us passed along the stalls, where sat the fair-haired, now silent, at gaze, as though in the grip of some great doubt. Silently Olaf strode beside me. Rador had disappeared. Down the stairway, through the hall of turquoise mist, over the rushing sea-stream we went and stood beside the wall through which we had entered. The white-robed ones had gone.

Yolara pressed; the portal opened. We stepped upon the car; she took the lever; we raced through the faintly luminous corridor to the house of the priestess.

And one thing now I knew sick at heart and soul the truth had come to me—no more need to search for Throckmartin. Behind that Veil, in the lair of the Dweller, dead-alive like those we had just seen swim in its shining train was he, and Edith, Stanton and Thora and Olaf Huldricksson’s wife!

The car came to rest; the portal opened; Yolara leaped out lightly, beckoned and flitted up the corridor. She paused before an ebon screen. At a touch it vanished, revealing an entrance to a small blue chamber, glowing as though cut from the heart of some gigantic sapphire; bare, save that in its centre, upon a low pedestal, stood a great globe fashioned from milky rock-crystal; upon its surface were faint tracings as of seas and continents, but, if so, either of some other world or of this world in immemorial past, for in no way did they resemble the mapped coastlines of our earth.

Poised upon the globe, rising from it out into space, locked in each other's arms, lips to lips, were two figures, a woman and a man, so exquisite, so lifelike, that for the moment I failed to realize that they, too, were carved of the crystal. And before this shrine—for nothing else could it be, I knew—three slender cones raised themselves: one of purest white flame, one of opalescent water, and the third of—moonlight! There was no mistaking them, the height of a tall man each stood—but how water, flame and light were held so evenly, so steadily in their spire-shapes, I could not tell.

Yolara bowed lowly—once, twice, thrice. She turned to O'Keefe, nor by slightest look or gesture betrayed she knew others were there than he. The blue eyes wide, searching, unfathomable, she drew close; put white hands on his shoulders, looked down into his very soul.

“My lord,” she murmured. “Now listen well for I, Yolara, give you three things—myself, and the Shining One, and the power that is the Shining One's—yea, and still a fourth thing that is all three—power over all upon that world from whence you came! These, my lord, ye shall have. I swear it”—she turned toward the altar—uplifted her arms— “by Siya and by Siyana, and by the flame, by the water, and by the light!”<sup>1</sup>

Her eyes grew purple dark.

“Let none dare to take you from me! Nor ye go from me unbidden!” she whispered fiercely.

Then swiftly, still ignoring us, she threw her arms about O'Keefe, pressed her white body to his breast, lips raised, eyes closed, seeking his. O'Keefe's arms tightened around her, his head dropped lips seeking, finding hers—passionately! From Olaf came a deep indrawn breath that was almost a groan. But not in my heart could I find blame for the Irishman!

The priestess opened eyes now all misty blue, thrust him back, stood regarding him. O'Keefe, dead-white, raised a trembling hand to his face.

“And thus have I sealed my oath, O my lord!” she whispered. For the first time she seemed to recognize our presence, stared at us a moment, then through us, and turned to O'Keefe.

“Go, now!” she said. “Soon Rador shall come for you. Then—well, after that let happen what will!”

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<sup>1</sup> I have no space here even to outline the eschatology of this people, nor to catalogue their pantheon. Siya and Siyana typified worldly love. Their ritual was, however, singularly free from those degrading elements usually found in love-cults. Priests and priestesses of all cults dwelt in the immense seven-terraced structure, of which the jet amphitheatre was the water side. The symbol, icon, representation, of Siya and Siyana—the globe and the up-striving figures—typified earthly love, feet bound to earth, but eyes among the stars. Hell or heaven I never heard formulated, nor their equivalents; unless that existence in the Shining One's domain could serve for either. Over all this was Thanaroa, remote; unheeding, but still maker and ruler of all—an absentee First Cause personified! Thanaroa seemed to be the one article of belief in the creed of the soldiers—Rador, with his reverence for the Ancient Ones, was an exception. Whatever there was, indeed, of high, truly religious impulse among the Murians, this far, High God had. I found this exceedingly interesting, because it had long been my theory—to put the matter in the shape of a geometrical formula—that the real attractiveness of gods to man increases uniformly according to the square of their distance—W. T. G.

She smiled once more at him—so sweetly; turned toward the figures upon the great globe; sank upon her knees before them. Quietly we crept away; still silent, made our way to the little pavilion. But as we passed we heard a tumult from the green roadway; shouts of men, now and then a woman's scream. Through a rift in the garden I glimpsed a jostling crowd on one of the bridges: green dwarfs struggling with the ladala—and all about droned a humming as of a giant hive disturbed!

Larry threw himself down upon one of the divans, covered his face with his hands, dropped them to catch in Olaf's eyes troubled reproach, looked at me.

"I couldn't help it," he said, half defiantly—half-miserably. "God, what a woman! I couldn't help it!"

"Larry," I asked. "Why didn't you tell her you didn't love her—then?"

He gazed at me—the old twinkle back in his eye.

"Spoken like a scientist, Doc!" he exclaimed. "I suppose if a burning angel struck you out of nowhere and threw itself about you, you would most dignifiedly tell it you didn't want to be burned. For God's sake, don't talk nonsense, Goodwin!" he ended, almost peevishly.

"Evil! Evil!" The Norseman's voice was deep, nearly a chant. "All here is of evil: Trolldom and Helvede it is, Ja! And that she djaevelsk of beauty—what is she but harlot of that shining devil they worship. I, Olaf Huldricksson, know what she meant when she held out to you power over all the world, Ja!—as if the world had not devils enough in it now!"

"What?" The cry came from both O'Keefe and myself at once.

Olaf made a gesture of caution, relapsed into sullen silence. There were footsteps on the path, and into sight came Rador—but a Rador changed. Gone was every vestige of his mockery; curiously solemn, he saluted O'Keefe and Olaf with that salute which, before this, I had seen given only to Yolara and to Lugur. There came a swift quickening of the tumult—died away. He shrugged mighty shoulders.

"The ladala are awake!" he said. "So much for what two brave men can do!" He paused thoughtfully. "Bones and dust jostle not each other for place against the grave wall!" he added oddly. "But if bones and dust have revealed to them that they still—live—"

He stopped abruptly, eyes seeking the globe that bore and sent forth speech.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I find that I have neglected to explain the working of these interesting mechanisms that were telephonic, dictaphonic, telegraphic in one. I must assume that my readers are familiar with the receiving apparatus of wireless telegraphy, which must be "tuned" by the operator until its own vibratory quality is in exact harmony with the vibrations—the extremely rapid impacts—of those short electric wavelengths we call Hertzian, and which carry the wireless messages. I must assume also that they are familiar with the elementary fact of physics that the vibrations of light and sound are interchangeable. The hearing-talking globes utilize both these principles, and with consummate simplicity. The light with which they shone was produced by an atomic "motor" within their base, similar to that which activated the merely illuminating globes. The composition of the phonic spheres gave their surfaces an acute sensitivity and resonance. In conjunction with its energizing power, the metal set up what is called a "field of force," which linked it with every particle of its kind no matter how distant. When vibrations of speech impinged upon



“The Afyo Maie has sent me to watch over you till she summons you,” he announced clearly. “There is to be a—feast. You, Larree, you Goodwin, are to come. I remain here with—Olaf.”

“No harm to him!” broke in O’Keefe sharply. Rador touched his heart, his eyes.

“By the Ancient Ones, and by my love for you, and by what you twain did before the Shining One—I swear it!” he whispered.

Rador clapped palms; a soldier came round the path, in his grip a long flat box of polished wood. The green dwarf took it, dismissed him, threw open the lid.

“Here is your apparel for the feast, Larree,” he said, pointing to the contents.

O’Keefe stared, reached down and drew out a white, shimmering, softly metallic, long-sleeved tunic, a broad, silvery girdle, leg swathings of the same argent material, and sandals that seemed to be cut out from silver. He made a quick gesture of angry dissent.

“Nay, Larree!” muttered the dwarf. “Wear them—I counsel it—I pray it—ask me not why,” he went on swiftly, looking again at the globe.

O’Keefe, as I, was impressed by his earnestness. The dwarf made a curiously expressive pleading gesture. O’Keefe abruptly took the garments; passed into the room of the fountain.

“The Shining One dances not again?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “No”—he hesitate—“it is the usual feast that follows the sacrament! Lugur—and Double Tongue, who came with you, will be there,” he added slowly.

“Lugur—” I gasped in astonishment. “After what happened—he will be there?”

“Perhaps because of what happened, Goodwin, my friend,” he answered—his eyes again full of malice; “and there will be others—friends of Yolará—friends of Lugur—and perhaps another”—his voice was almost inaudible—“one whom they have not called—” He halted, half-fearfully, glancing at the globe; put finger to lips and spread himself out upon one of the couches.

“Strike up the band”—came O’Keefe’s voice—“here comes the hero!”

He strode into the room. I am bound to say that the admiration in Rador’s eyes was reflected in my own, and even, if involuntarily, in Olaf’s.

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*the resonant surface its rhythmic light-vibrations were broken, just as a telephone transmitter breaks an electric current. Simultaneously these light-vibrations were changed into sound—on the surfaces of all spheres tuned to that particular instrument. The “crawling” colours which showed themselves at these times were literally the voice of the speaker in its spectrum equivalent. While usually the sounds produced required considerable familiarity with the apparatus to be understood quickly, they could, on occasion, be made startlingly loud and clear—as I was soon to realize—W. T. G.*

“A son of Siyana!” whispered Rador.

He knelt, took from his girdle-pouch a silk-wrapped something, unwound it—and, still kneeling, drew out a slender poniard of gleaming white metal, hilted with the blue stones; he thrust it into O’Keefe’s girdle; then gave him again the rare salute.

“Come,” he ordered and took us to the head of the pathway.

“Now,” he said grimly, “let the Silent Ones show their power—if they still have it!”

And with this strange benediction, he turned back.

“For God’s sake, Larry,” I urged as we approached the house of the priestess, “you’ll be careful!”

He nodded—but I saw with a little deadly pang of apprehension in my heart a puzzled, lurking doubt within his eyes.

As we ascended the serpent steps Marakinoff appeared. He gave a signal to our guards—and I wondered what influence the Russian had attained, for promptly, without question, they drew aside. At me he smiled amiably.

“Have you found your friends yet?” he went on—and now I sensed something deeply sinister in him. “No! It is too bad! Well, don’t give up hope.” He turned to O’Keefe.

“Lieutenant, I would like to speak to you—alone!”

“I’ve no secrets from Goodwin,” answered O’Keefe.

“So?” queried Marakinoff, suavely. He bent, whispered to Larry.

The Irishman started, eyed him with a certain shocked incredulity, then turned to me.

“Just a minute, Doc!” he said, and I caught the suspicion of a wink. They drew aside, out of ear-shot. The Russian talked rapidly. Larry was all attention. Marakinoff’s earnestness became intense; O’Keefe interrupted—appeared to question. Marakinoff glanced at me and as his gaze shifted from O’Keefe, I saw a flame of rage and horror blaze up in the latter’s eyes. At last the Irishman appeared to consider gravely; nodded as though he had arrived at some decision, and Marakinoff thrust his hand to him.

And only I could have noticed Larry’s shrinking, his microscopic hesitation before he took it, and his involuntary movement, as though to shake off something unclean, when the clasp had ended.

Marakinoff, without another look at me, turned and went quickly within. The guards took their

places. I looked at Larry inquiringly.

“Don’t ask a thing now, Doc!” he said tensely. “Wait till we get home. But we’ve got to get damned busy and quick—I’ll tell you that now—”

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