

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 13, ISSUE 14
5TH AUGUST 2018

NIGHT AT THE BIG TOP

BY AARON
ALAN PFAU
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OF THE
CIRCUS IS
STRONG...*

A CURLED MOUTH

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*THE
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CROSS COUNTRY BY ROB BLISS

THE FLAW OF ATTRACTION BY CHRIS TUTTY

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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. 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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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *Tunnel, Father Son* by [Minhaz000](#). Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

EDITORIAL

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INK WELL! *Horror Comics and Comic Horror* from Vincent Davis

NIGHT AT THE BIG TOP by Aaron Alan Pfau—*The magic of the circus is strong...* HORROR

A CURLED MOUTH by Joseph J Patchen—*The greatest mystery of all is in front of me...*

HORROR

CROSS COUNTRY by Rob Bliss—*As soon as you retire, you're dead...* HORROR

THE FLAW OF ATTRACTION by Chris Tutty—"You really do attract the things you want."

SCIENCE FANTASY

LOBSTER'S REVENGE Part Three by Jesse Zimmerman—*He's just a big red clown with the mind of a child...* HEROIC FANTASY

THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE Part Twenty-Two by Gregory KH Bryant—*Approaching the Derelict...* SPACE OPERA

ACROSS THE ZODIAC Chapter Twenty-Eight by Percy Greg—*Darker yet...* PLANETARY ROMANCE

THE MOON POOL Chapter One by A Merritt—*The Thing on the Moon Path...* SCIENCE FICTION CLASSIC

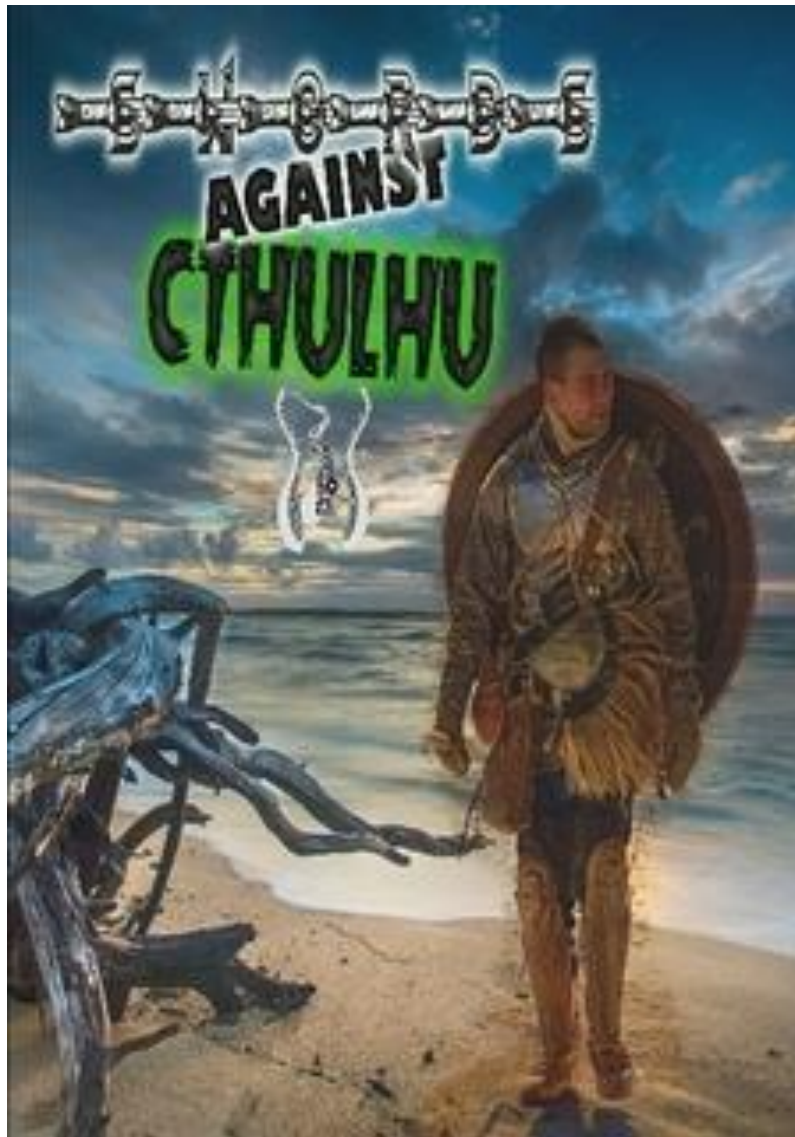
EDITORIAL

This week, we introduce the comic art of Vincent Davis in *It Came from Inside the Inkwell!* Meanwhile, intruders in the Big Top get more than they can take of the magic of the circus. A recently divorced man awakens to the true horror of his existence. Another fatal awakening to reality awaits a young cop out on the country roads at night. And an unhappy Iron Maiden fan comes face to face with himself and finally learns how to escape.

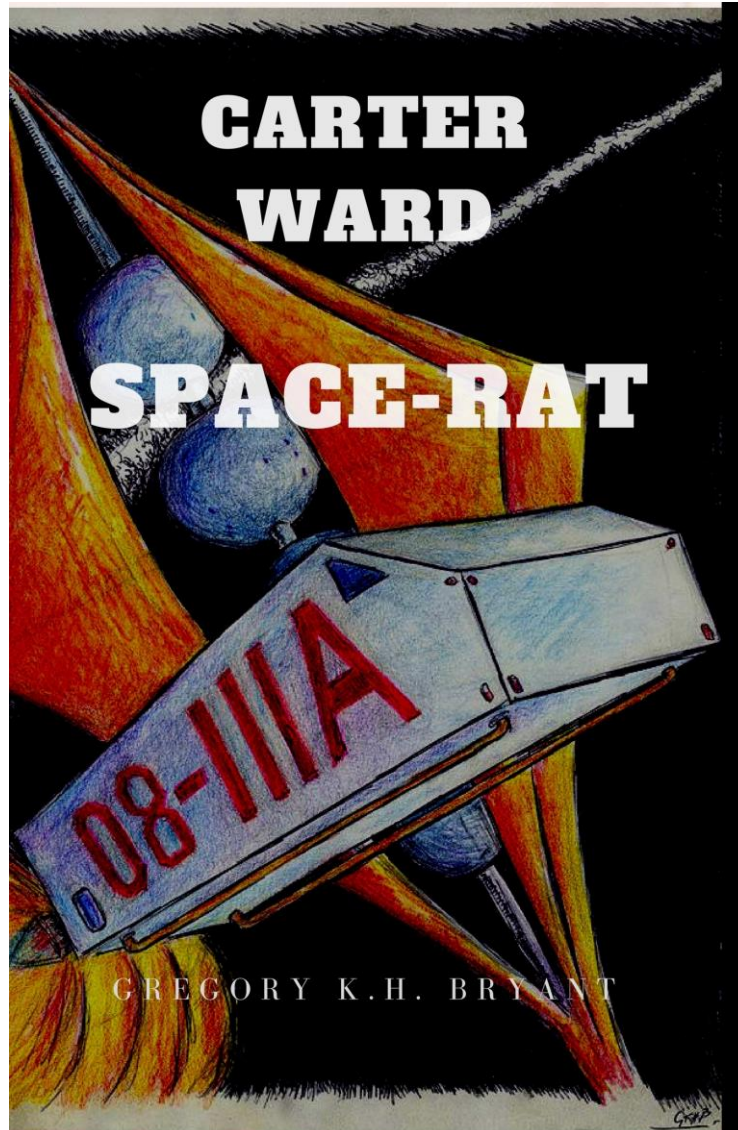
Flora, Fauna, and the Challenger fight Lobster-Man and the alphabolds—but who will triumph, the forces of chaos or order? And which is which, anyway? Out in space, the *Dawnsmasher* is approaching the *Derelict*. Meanwhile, on Mars, things are getting dark. And finally, coming back down to Earth, we announce with much pleasure the first instalment of our new classic serial, A Merritt's renowned pulp classic, first published in All-Story Weekly a century ago, *The Moon Pool*.

—Gavin Chappell

Now available from Rogue Planet Press: [*Swords against Cthulhu III: A New Dark Age*](#)



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



[Return to Contents](#)

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

by Vincent Davis



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.

[Return to Contents](#)

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

NIGHT AT THE BIG TOP by Aaron Alan Pfau

"It's so dreamy," Karen said, appraising the large yellow and red striped tent in the distance. "Oh, I just love the big top. The whole thing, really. I love the circus." Her eyes sparkled, like fine diamonds.

"Yeah," Susan agreed.

"I wonder where it came from?" asked Steve. "I'm sure that it wasn't here yesterday." He twirled a Bic lighter casually between fingers.

"They sure set up fast, don't they?" Susan said.

"Perhaps, it just sprouted up from the ground," Karen said, "like from a magic bean."

There were no lights inside. The tent looked like a burnt-out lightbulb. The party of three gazed yearningly at the spectacle from behind a gate. Around them hung darkness. The kind that inspires dreams and magic.

"I sure wish it were open," Steve said. "I'm just dying for a corndog."

"Yeah, but the carnival doesn't open for another week," Susan said.

"Well," Karen replied, wrinkling her nose, "why can't it be?"

"Uh, have you ever heard of trespassing?" Steve said. He clicked the Bic lighter and it snapped to life with a spark.

"By the way," Susan added, "nothing's even been set-up yet. You can say adios to that corndog, pal."

"Oh, just a peek," Karen said. "Just a peek inside."

"Have you lost your bird?" Susan said. "What if we get caught?"

"We won't," Karen replied. "If you're not too chickenshit, that is? She slid into Steve's embrace with ease. Susan rolled her eyes.

Upon mutual consent, the party of three scaled the shoulder-high chain-link fence. Steve went over extravagantly. Susan climbed the fence prissily and came down the other side in the same fashion, making it a point to keep her skirt tucked as she switched sides. Karen, a three-time gold medal champion in gymnastics, topped them all and performed a remarkable somersault over, landing gracefully on both feet.

To catcalls, she shifted her weight between legs and curtsied a bow.

The carnival was dark and unoccupied, not yet alive. The moon was out in force that night. A full one. Viewed in unreal silhouette, the large rides and attractions took on the appearance of something from a children's pop-up book. All grotesque shapes and muted phantasmagoric colours. The entrance to the waltzer seemed to be grinning, as if inviting patrons to step inside so that it might eat them. The horses on the carousel were just as dead as the carnival, despite the lively prancing stances that they were eternally frozen into. All of the marquee signs were in hibernation and the loudspeakers that perched on top of the wooden posts were unemployed too. The Ferris wheel governed over all. All except the big top, that is.

It was August. The first real testimony of fall was in the air and painted on the leaves. The summer warmth still lingered indigently but it now knew that it was unwelcome. Occasionally, a rogue gust of October wind broke through, like a time traveller racing backwards through time. Dry leaves were scattered all over the ground like tiny ribcages. The kind the crunch when stepped on.

"Is that cotton candy I smell?" Steve asked, taking a few investigative whiffs. "It is! Guys, I smell cotton candy!"

"Hey, you're right," Susan said, her nose upturned as well.

The sweet, sugary smell of artificial flavour floated like a wraith across the vacant alleys, where performers would soon be entertaining, and the deserted thoroughfares, where children would soon be seen skipping.

Steve lifted the lid to a display cart that advertised *COTTON CANDY!* in big alternating blue and pink letters. "Big gyp," he said, at finding it empty.

"No, I think it's coming from the big top," Karen said, sniffing first in one direction and then another.

"But there's nobody here," Susan contended.

There was no denying that. There was also no denying that the smell grew in strength as they neared the big top. It was no longer just the ghost of a whiff, but an intense all-encompassing smell. Mixed with at least a dozen others. An odour cocktail of sugary cotton candy, deep fried corndogs, mint flavoured malts, salty peanuts, popcorn. It was as if the dead circus was coming to life all around them. Like a wind-up toy being wound into animation. Or perhaps, like an embalmed corpse done up in an effigy of the living.

"C'mon, I say we turn back," Susan said, shivering at a singular gust of chill wind. "The carny just isn't as cheerful without the lights and music."

"Yeah, it's getting pretty late too," Steve added.

"I just wanna peek inside," Karen replied.

She poked her head into one of the corners of the tent where two flaps met and created a fold.

“Wow!” she exclaimed. “Oh, man, you guys have to see this!”

“What?” Steve said, sticking his head in above hers, for he was a head taller.

He saw light. Blinding light. Yellow. It stabbed his pupils, which were both retracted. He heard sounds. Loud. No, very loud. Applause. Not just one set of hands but hundreds, all in concert. Cheering and whistling. The inaudible clamouring of many voices. Muzak, light and festive.

Yet, when his eyes adjusted to the light, he could see no audience. The amphitheatre of seats was all empty. But still, the mad jubilations of a full house were real enough to his ears. The brilliant spotlights were real too, though they cast no illumination on the walls of the tent, which were certainly translucent. From outside, the big top looked just as dark and as lifeless as the rest of the carnival. Inside, however, it was brimming with life.

By now, Susan had joined heads inside the tent as well. The three of them looking like a comical totem pole.

“Hey, what’s the trick?” Susan asked, her bewilderment showing on her face. She didn’t even have to look up to tell that the rest of their faces were perfect mirrors of her own.

“SFX,” Steve said, at last. “It has to be!” His voice betrayed the uncertainty in which he spoke those words.

“How about that light?” Susan asked. She rubbed the corner of the tent between her fingers. “It’s as thin as paper, and yet... and yet, the light doesn’t seem to penetrate it at all. The sound either.”

Steve was the first to step fully into the big top. Outside, it was as quiet as a cemetery after hours. Inside, the sound was magnified into a magnificent roar. Whereas before they had been speaking in hushed whispers, Steve now had to raise his voice and shout just to be heard at all.

“Someone’s messing with us!”

The rest of the group joined him inside. The unseen audience clapped and cheered even louder, as if at their surprise entrance. Karen had half a mind to curtsy a bow. None of them could quite shake the feeling that, although they were apparently alone underneath the tent, they were simultaneously all under scrutiny.

Suddenly, the house lights dimmed, and the spotlights took sovereignty. The audience gasped with amazement and then hushed, expectantly.

“Too weird,” Steve said.

“Steve, look!” Susan said, pointing.

Approaching them, walking stiffly and slowly across the centre stage, was man. He was well past middle-age. He walked with a dignified hunch and propped himself up on a black cane with a golden brass knob. His bushy hair and curled moustache were both the sole colour of age. A distinguished silver. However, the evening suit he wore was a psychedelic smattering of every colour in the spectrum. To be sure, it was a strange thing. The tie was striped red and white. His slacks were green and blue polka-dot. The jacket was lavender, but the shirt underneath was lilac. The top hat that sat with providence on top of his head was as black as the night, in which the group had just come.

No one stirred. The old man did not transmit a particularly hostile presence. He couldn't have stood more than five feet tall and he couldn't have weighed more than one hundred and twenty pounds. The ridiculous suit fit him like a potato sack fitting one potato. There was something, Susan thought, remarkably sad about him.

"Good evening," he said. He spoke casually, as if he were not in the least perturbed at finding the unexpected guests. A faint Italian accent accentuated his voice with precision.

"Look, I'm sorry that we trespassed onto your carnival," Steve said, "but, boy, you sure had a good one on us." He looked at the rest of the group, who all nodded in mutual agreement.

"I'm not sure that I quite understand," the old man said, eyebrows cocked. "What are you doing here inside my tent?"

"Ah, so you must own this place?" Steve said.

"My name is Doctor Prodigium. I am the ringleader here."

Steve couldn't help but laugh, hiding it behind the pretext of a cough.

Here, Karen stepped forward and bowed low, cutting Steve a sideward glance and displaying a smile that she hoped would be disarming. "Listen, we just wanted to peek in is all. Honest. We didn't mean to come inside. But I suppose that when we heard all that noise we just couldn't help ourselves."

"Noise?" Doctor Prodigium said. Suspicion and incredulity were both painted on his face writ large. "I can assure you that I am quite alone." This last bit, he spoke with a trace of remorse.

"Yeah, the sound effects," Steve said, waving an enveloping arm around the big top. "Say, where's it coming from? It sure sounds convincing."

"And how come you can't hear it outside?" Susan added. "Or see the light too? It's like it stops right at the edge of the tent."

Doctor Prodigium tilted his head down, as if in deep thought. He seemed to be searching the recesses of his mind for some lost meaning. His brow was furrowed in deep concentration. At last, a knowing smile stretched itself across his face. He snapped his fingers and composed

himself triumphantly.

“The circus,” he said. “You can hear the circus!” His toneless voice had transformed into one of pure delight.

“Of course we can,” replied Steve. “So, what’s the trick?”

“What does it sound like?” Doctor Prodigium asked. He looked nearly twenty years younger. His face bathing in the warm spotlight like a Turkish bath. His eyes were closed, as if he were drawing a mental picture. Both hands clasped preciously to his cheeks. “It’s marvellous, isn’t it? Nothing else on earth can compare. Tell me, can you hear the magic?”

“You mean,” Steve said, “you can’t hear that?”

The look of sheer bliss on Doctor Prodigium’s face softened and then went out altogether, like the flame of a candle. He opened his eyes, which saw only the greys and blacks of a desolate tent. He held his hands out before him and stared emptily into the palms.

“I,” he confessed, “cannot. I can hear them as well as a corpse might hear his own heartbeat.”

Steve looked to Karen, doubtfully. Karen replied by sticking her index finger and thumb to her head like a pistol and twirling the index in circles.

“Where is it coming from?” Susan asked, again. “That sound; the audience, the music. And the smells too; cotton candy and popcorn and all that.”

A nostalgic smile refolded on the old man’s lips. He bared his teeth which were just as pale as the moon, and quite sharp. “That, my dear,” he said, “is the magic of the circus.”

The group shared a three-way communication that was transmitted solely by the eyes.

“What a sound it makes, eh?” he continued, erupting into a burst of laughter. “It’s been so very long since I’ve heard it. Since I’ve felt it. It’s not the same thing being on the other side of the curtain, you know? To watch the audience night after night, just as they watch me up on that stage, and to envy them. To watch as their faces are kindled with inspiration and then ignited with awe. To see the trapeze artist working his magic and to hear audible gasp when he falterers. Will he fall?” Doctor Prodigium held his hand above his mouth, as if in shock. He then lowered it, soberly. “I, of course, know full well that he won’t. Wires, you see,” he explained. “And yet, now another season has passed with yet another year.”

“Listen, P.T Barnum,” Steve said, “your cockamamie sales pitch isn’t gonna work on us. I stopped believing in Santa Claus when I was ten years old. We just wanted to see the inside of the big top is all.”

If Doctor Prodigium heard Steve’s words, he showed no sign of acknowledgment. He simply gazed into the invisible audience wistfully. “To be among them,” he said, “what a glorious thing

it must be.”

Karen tugged on Steve’s shirt sleeve and gave an encouraging nod to the exit. Steve roused Susan’s attention and she likewise followed.

“My friends,” Doctor Prodigium said, suddenly, upon nothing their retreat, “do you not wish to enjoy the magic of the circus with me? Stay and chat. It has been so long since I’ve had someone to talk to without the spotlights between us.”

“We really oughta get goin’,” Steve said.

“Yeah,” Karen added. “We’re awfully sorry for bothering you. Thanks for being a good sport about it.”

Doctor Prodigium looked hurt. Suddenly, the impression of an idea was planted on his face, replacing the frown, and sprouted into a look of surmounting victory. His eyes gleamed under the glow of the spotlight, just as white as his teeth.

“My friends, my friends,” he said, beckoning them back forward with his hands, “I’m having a good one on you, as you say. I’m pulling your leg. You do not think that I can’t hear those sounds?” Here, he laughed. “The magic of the circus and all that rubbish. No. Stuff and nonsense. That I don’t know the transmission of the sounds that you find so curious? Allow me to demonstrate.”

There was laughter all around.

“You really had us going,” Steve said. “Personally, I thought that you had really blown your top.”

Doctor Prodigium laughed even harder. He then clicked his tongue in a scolding sort of way. “You know that all us circus folk are merely hucksters and charlatans. Here, watch carefully and observe.”

He reached into his jacket and fished around.

“Remote control,” Steve muttered to Susan.

“It won’t work if you don’t watch carefully,” Doctor Prodigium reiterated, good-humouredly.

Steve cleared his throat and silenced. All three watched Doctor Prodigium’s hands with a rapt attention.

His hand shot back out as quick as a flame is drawn from a lighter. He was holding a silver pendant that hung from a long silver chain and gleamed. It swung back and forth in his hand like a pendulum.

“Forgo all amenities when traversing the wells of time,” he said, in a voice that was soft and soothing, “recline your head, eat some popcorn, and have a good time.”

When Susan awoke, her head was reclined back on one of the seats. The sounds were still there—the murmuring of the unseen audience, the Muzak—and the smells too—the popcorn, the cotton candy, the peanuts. Steve was sitting up in the seat beside her. He was still asleep, she observed.

At first, a level-headed kind of confusion swam over her. If a level-headed confusion sounds like something of a contradiction, it was nothing compared to the insane reality of what came next.

Karen was walking gracefully across the centre stage. Her feet were easy and light, and she was swaying her arms all around in delicate, swan-like movements. The spotlights observed her progress from above.

“Karen!” Susan called out. Her words were drowned out in the excited chattering of the audience and the music still playing.

She tried to raise her arms and found that they were fastened to the seat. Her legs too. Thick knots of rope secured each of her wrists to their respective armrests. Her ankles were tied together, and the rope doubled back behind the seat.

A hysterical scream issued from her throat. It woke Steve, who reacted in fashion just as passionate. Their screams echoed around the big top, but Karen didn’t seem to hear them. She seemed to be stuck in a sort of hypnotic trance. Her eyes were completely closed, yet she moved across the stage with precision.

“Ah, you are coming around,” a voice spoke. It belonged to Doctor Prodigium. He was sitting in the row behind them. “The first performance is about to begin, eh? I had just begun to worry. I said, they will not see it. Fortunately for us all, you are right in time.”

“Performance?” Steve asked. “What the hell did you do to us?”

“Let us go!” Susan protested.

“Hypnotism,” Doctor Prodigium replied, not choosing to notice Susan’s last remark.

“Elementary hypnotism. I fear that it was the only way that I could convince you to join me on this very special night. I feel that we are all in for a real treat.”

“What do you want from us?” asked Steve, fighting the ropes.

“The greatest gift that one can give to another. I want magic. I look around this tent and I see and hear and smell nothing but the emptiness of dull reality. I want to feel what it feels like to be on the other side of the spotlight again. To see and hear and smell what you see, what you hear, what you smell. Tonight, is a very special night, indeed. The magic of the circus is strong.”

Karen approached a tall wooden pole with a black ladder that dived fathomlessly up into the depths of the big top. She began to climb it. To the two who made up the captive audience, it was a spectacular sight. The spotlights fencing aerobics around her. The audience gasping and gesticulating with amazement. A drumroll sounding off in anticipation.

“You know,” Doctor Prodigium said, in a tone of great reminiscence, “the first really vivid memory that I have is of my father taking me to the circus. Lord, sixty years ago, it must have been. I was just a wee lad then. I can still taste that first bite of cotton candy. How it dissolved in my mouth like snow melting in the hot sun.” He giggled. “I can still hear the audience cheering wildly. In my head, you see, they never stopped. I can—” Suddenly, the expression on his face changed. It was as if he had just been struck by lightning. “And there they are!” he remarked, genuinely awe-struck. “I can hear them! I can... is that cotton candy that I smell. It is! Oh, my, and just listen to that music!” Doctor Prodigium then cupped his hands over his eyes. “Ah, how warm and bright the lights are.” He allowed them the opportunity to adjust. “What beauty! What fantastic beauty!” he uttered, breathlessly.

He now witnessed the same incredible scene that his two hostages did. Karen was nearly halfway up the ladder by now, which reached almost to the peak of the big top. The drumming had grown faster and more intense. The audience clapped, egging her on, trying to keep the same frantic beat as the drums. Doctor Prodigium joined in, clapping enthusiastically and looking affectionately from side to side, as though he were reuniting with old friends.

“Make her stop!” Steve pleaded. “Oh, God, make her stop!”

Doctor Prodigium just chuckled.

He then leaned forward in his seat and said, “You know, my favourite performance in all of the circus has always been the tightrope walker.”

Susan gasped as Karen finished her ascent up the ladder. A thin rope, no thicker than the edge of a razor blade, charted a path from the crow’s nest in which she stood to another similar pole nearly fifty feet away. She must’ve been a hundred feet off the ground.

“I believe,” Doctor Prodigium said, raising his hand, “that the show is about to begin.” He snapped his fingers together.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” a voice boomed loudly. It came from nowhere but everywhere all at once.

The black ladder that Karen had climbed fell to the side and landed with a thud on the stage below. Karen opened her eyes, blinked, observed her surroundings, and screamed.

“Give three good cheers for the tightrope walker!” the voice echoed, accentuating each word with emphasis.

Karen looked like a helpless rabbit caught in a snare trap. She huddled close to pole and wrapped

her arms tightly around it. Her face registered sheer insanity.

Doctor Prodigium plucked a kernel of popcorn into his mouth and reclined his head.

“And,” the omnipresent voice added, “if that isn’t enough excitement for you. Just to heat things up a bit.”

A yellow spark suddenly sparked to life at the base of the pole. It licked the splintered wood and, finding it tasteful, began to feast.

Susan and Steve could do nothing but watch in horror as Karen unsuccessfully looked below her for anything soft to land on.

The base of the thick pole grew an ashy black as the flames began their ascent, conquering the fertile ground above. The sturdiness of the pole still held, but it wouldn’t for long.

“You know what the best part is of all?” Doctor Prodigium leaned forward to exclaim. “No wires!”

Karen looked down to her friends, who must’ve looked like ants to her. They waved her on urgently with their heads.

She stretched one foot out and met the thin line. Possibly recalling her gymnastics championships. Doing backflips and headstands on the balance beam. Possibly telling herself that it was far from the same thing. The drumroll ceased. The big top was as silent as a tomb.

Sobbing and overwhelmed with hysteria, Karen removed her other foot from the crow’s nest. The line bobbed. She retreated back and tried the manoeuvre again, this time expecting the sudden drop. With another careful step both feet were now on the tightrope. Her arms were stretched out wide at her sides, like a pair of wings. Not that they would do much to keep her in flight if she were to fall.

The flames climbed higher to vacant space. Karen took another step, moving as slowly as the hour hand on a watch. Allowing her foot to hover above the line for nearly a whole minute before bringing her weight down on it. She bobbed, righted herself valiantly, and then froze. Simmering in the back of her head was that often spoken, rarely followed advice, whatever you do, don’t look down!

Doctor Prodigium was practically squatting above his seat, watching through clasped fingers. Susan was not watching at all. She had her eyes clamped shut. Steve was screaming and convulsing in his seat as though it were an electric chair brought to life, but the ropes did not give.

Karen lost her balance. She teetered agonizingly back and forth on the string like a spinning top losing momentum.

“No!” Steve screamed.

The tightrope gave an audible twang, as if it were a guitar string being strummed. Karen fell like a stone. She landed on the stage in an orchestra of gore. No one needed a doctor to assure them that she was quite dead.

The smile on Doctor Prodigium’s face was smothered instantaneously. “No,” he said, lowering his hands from his eyes. The charade was over. He looked around but all that he saw now were empty seats and a darkened tent. The sounds had stopped and so had the smells.

To the other two, the tent was just as bright as before. The light withheld nothing. Crimson stained the entire stage. The first row of seats had been splashed with the stuff. Fortunately for themselves, they were not in attendance. The audience bellowed with applause. Whistling, feet stomping, calls of encore. Not that Karen would be giving one. As if on cue, the flames stopped devouring the pole and were extinguished.

“Klutz!” Doctor Prodigium cried out in despair. “She was supposed to make it to the other end. The tightrope walker always makes it to the other end! Ay!” He collected himself. “Oh, well. I suppose that we won’t allow one distasteful event to spoil the rest of this fine evening, will we?”

Again, he removed the silver pendant from his jacket pocket.

“I’ll kill you!” Steve screamed.

“Please,” Susan sobbed, but just barely, “no more.”

“Watch carefully,” Doctor Prodigium replied, simply, fishing the pendant before the two and swaying it back and forth. “Forgo all amenities when traversing the wells of time.” The two captives began to dose. “Recline your head, eat some popcorn, and have a good time.”

Once more, Susan awoke in bondage, in the very same seat. Her voice weak and husky, for she remembered a good deal of screaming. All the evidence of the nightmare persisted. She opened her eyes and there it was. The extravagant sights, sounds, and smells were as described before. Steve was, Susan observed with a surmounting horror, absent from his own seat. All that remained in his chair were the loose knots of rope that he been bound by. Her own were still quite intact.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the loud booming voice returned. “It’s not easy being a tightrope walker, that’s for sure. For starters, your job is always on the line.”

The ghost audience exploded with laughter. A drumbeat punctuated the bad joke.

“But hopefully you’ve all had the chance to grab a well-balanced meal,” more laughter, another drumbeat, “in the meantime, because we have another act for you that has a real edge to it.”

“I always love that moment right before the lights dim,” Doctor Prodigium said, quite suddenly.

Again, he was sitting in the row behind them. “Can’t you just feel the anticipation? You can practically taste it in your lungs.” He brought a grotesque swirl of blue and pink cotton candy to his lips from a stick and devoured it. He was swept up in the realm of fantasy.

“But,” the voice of the tent said, the lights dimming, “allow me to get to the point.”

At this, a brilliant spotlight penetrated a dark corner of the stage. Susan immediately found her voice to be in working order.

Steve was fastened to a large wooden sphere. On it, the face of a dartboard had been crudely drawn. His limbs were stretched out into the shape of X. His mouth was gagged, but the gesticulations of terror emitting from it were quite clear.

The audience boiled over with excitement. Doctor Prodigium bit into his hand and squealed like a schoolboy.

“The Impalement arts!” he cried, from his seat. “How I can remember my first act. Lord, I was just a boy living in Turin.” He then clarified, “Italy, the land of wine and debt, oh my. All my youth, I had no greater ambition in life than work for the traveling circus. At the age of fourteen, I got my first job. The knife thrower’s assistant. How proud my father was.”

Steve was fighting the ropes to no prevail.

“Here, ladies and gentlemen, we require one lucky volunteer!” the big top said. “How about it? Anyone out there want to take a stab at it?”

Doctor Prodigium pounced from his seat, throwing both hands wildly in the air as though they were on fire. He craned down momentarily to say, “Raise your hands, raise your hands! You’re going to miss your chance, you know.” He had either forgotten about the ropes binding Susan’s wrists in place or simply chose not to heed them, for he seemed very earnest.

“Hmmm!” The voice of the big top seemed to circulate around the arena of seats, as if looking over candidates. It had the same gradual increase/decrease effect that a passing truck does. “The man in the top hat!” it said, at last.

Doctor Prodigium’s face rose in utter surprise. In another moment, he was skipping gaily to the centre stage, waving off into the crowd, blowing kisses. The audience cheered him on. He took centre stage with a formal bow, removing his top hat.

He doesn’t want us to die, Susan thought, madly, recalling the look on his face after Karen had... after Karen had fallen. No. We have to pass in order to keep this... this whatever you call it intact. What do you call it? It didn’t matter, she concluded, if was mass hypnotism, a living nightmare, or LSD. Doctor Prodigium was not trying to kill them, at least not actively. The best thing to do was to play by the rules.

“So,” the big top said, “you think you have what it takes to make the cut?” Laughter. A drumroll.

“On the table before you,” a second spotlight suddenly illuminated a small table camouflaged in the darkness, “you will find five razor-sharp knives. Inspect them, if you will.”

Indeed, there were. Five knives all stuck into the table by the tip, to illustrate their fine edge. With some effort, Doctor Prodigium dislodged one of them and studied it closely. There was no cheat. Satisfied, he held it up to the audience and nodded.

“But,” the voice continued, “if you think that’s just a little too dull, will you please hold up the object on the table before you?”

Doctor Prodigium removed a small black object from the table and held it above his head. It was a blindfold.

The audience quieted with anticipation. Doctor Prodigium placed the blindfold across his eyes and tied the end off. With mental precision, he turned in the direction of Steve and brandished one of the knives far back above his head.

He’s just gotta stay perfectly still, Susan thought. He’s just gotta survive. If he kills Steve, the charade will end.

Thwack! He threw and recoiled his arm as quickly as if it were on a spring. A gasp issued from the crowd. The knife found a home right between Steve’s legs, missing the goods by a mere inch. A round of applause flooded the arena. Susan withdrew from a flinch and sighed.

The second knife was quickly unsheathed from the table. Again, Doctor Prodigium thrust it forward with a stunning accuracy. It dug into the wooden sphere just above Steve’s shoulder. The thwack of the blade was loud and reverberating in his ear.

Susan swallowed. Beads of sweat created streams on her forehead. Her fists were done up so tight that her nails left red crescent indentations in her palms.

The third knife. Thwack! It hit so near Steve’s armpit that it caught some of his shirt and pinned it to the wooden board behind him. More applause from the audience.

Doctor Prodigium threw the fourth knife. It struck right above Steve’s wrist and severed the rope that bound his right hand in place.

“No, no, no!” Susan shouted.

Steve had brought his right shoulder down and was trying undo the rope around his left wrist. Doctor Prodigium was clearly oblivious to this, as per the blindfold. He dislodged the last of the knives and cocked it above his head.

“Stop moving!” Susan called out. Her voice didn’t make it far. The audience was exploding with a macabre glee.

This time, there was no wooden thwack when the knife hit. The report came in the form of a low gurgle.

For Doctor Prodigium, the audience became suddenly muted. The music had stopped as well. There were no more delicious smells. He removed the blindfold in confusion and saw, to his horror, that the fifth knife had pierced Steve's throat. He glanced all around him. Dull reality hung where fantasy had once been.

"Imbecile!" Doctor Prodigium roared with fury. He then pranced around the stage desperately humming snatches of music to himself, inviting the fantasy back. Null.

"That's two acts that have spoiled my evening," he scolded, walking headlong back up the aisles of seats that were, to Susan, still magnificently lit and quite employed. "If it were just one, I could excuse. But two! Why, we only have the one left. The evening is almost over! It is already going by much too quickly. We must not allow it to get away from us."

Doctor Prodigium once again removed the silver pendant from his jacket pocket.

"Ah, well," he said, "I just know that the next act will be even better. The circus has never before disappointed me. My dear," he then added, "you must watch the pretty silver."

But Susan had her eyes clamped tight.

In an offended tone, Doctor Prodigium said, "Did you not hear what I said, the evening is almost over. Why, we still have one act to go!"

"I'm not gonna be another one of your puppets," she said.

"Puppet?" Doctor Prodigium laughed. "I'm giving you an opportunity. Is there anything more exciting than being a circus performer?" He spoke the words circus performer in a grand, majestic tone. "No? Well, I'm afraid that if you will not participate than I must resort to more unscrupulous means."

He pulled on the brass handle of his cane and unsheathed a small dagger. After a minute or two of diligent work, Susan's eyes were wide open. She would not be able to shut them now, for the eyelids had been removed.

"Now, then," Doctor Prodigium said, distastefully, putting the dirty business behind him, "let us progress. Forgo all amenities when traversing the wells of time." He began, again, swaying the pendant to-and-fro like a pendulum. Susan's eyes softened and then closed. "Recline your head, eat some popcorn, and have a good time."

At the snapping of fingers, Susan awoke. She was no longer in her seat. The spotlight was blinding and warm on her face. She was on the other side of it now.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the big top bellowed, "you'll find that our next act has a real bite to it."

The sound of a metal gate being unlatched. At this, the audience went wild.

The house lights flared up in an incandescent splendour. The spotlights drew submissively back. Nothing was withheld from the crowd. Nor Susan.

Instinctively, she gazed out into the wide uproarious crowd. Not expecting to see them, of course. However, she could not shake the feeling that hundreds of watchful eyes were glaring down upon her. Doctor Prodigium was in his usual seat. Not exactly in the seat, per say, but prancing merrily above with a half-eaten corndog in hand. Back in his euphoria, she gathered.

She found herself in a large enclosure. A metal gate surrounded her on all four sides, nearly ten feet high. A low growling suddenly startled her.

An enormous lion capered ferociously before her. Its white teeth just as eager and as hungry as its two eyes.

“Welcome,” the big top announced, “the lion tamer!”

Susan thrust herself against the cage, too horror-struck to move. The screams loaded in her throat but not finding voice. In one palm was a long leather whip. In the other she discovered a small wooden stool.

The lion circled the enclosure, standing between her and the exit on the adverse side. It jostled, testing her. Susan merely shrank back. The lion seemed to grin as it engaged her again. Playing with her like a cat padding a mouse back and forth in its paws, knowing full well that it will eventually kill it.

Susan bravely snapped the whip at the creature to no effect. It only served to anger the brute, who charged headlong. With a shriek of fright, Susan brandished the wooden stool above her head. The lion’s jaws caught one of the legs and removed it with ease. Temporarily inconvenienced, it drew back.

The crowd cheered, approvingly. It spread infectiously across the amphitheatre of seats.

The creature charged again, coming at her like a cyclone. She snapped the whip. The lion snatched it away. Its teeth found her blouse and removed it as easily as a banana being peeled of its skin. She rebounded clumsily, stumbling and falling face-first on the stage, the wooden stool gyrating out of reach, another leg snapping off. She was helpless. Like a limp gazelle.

The side of her face met the stage in a reprise of pain. She heard teeth cracking. Then, it was all gone. Not just the lion and the enclosure, but everything. The lights, the audience, the sounds, the smells. All that remained were herself and Doctor Prodigium, far off, sitting alone in a dark and colourless circus tent. It all returned just as quickly. Like an old photograph being brought to vivid and colourful life.

It's not real, she thought. None of it is real.

The stunning world around her began to crackle, like bad TV reception. Reality and fantasy clashed inharmoniously. Shades of both, alternating in intensity.

It's just like a curtain.

Like the emerald city in the Wonderful World of Oz, the façade began to crumble. The air held nothing but dust and darkness. The unoccupied seats watched with a bland indifference. The only sound to be heard was that of Doctor Prodigium's sole jubilations and the only smell was that of age and decay.

Slowly, painfully, she rose to her feet. The lion was gearing up for another charge. She merely stood there. The face of the creature was all distorted now. Its eyes were drooping as though they were melting off. The jowls of the beast sagged almost to the stage. Its eyes were empty portals.

When the beast pounced, she recoiled, arms raised in defence. But there was no blow. When she lowered her arms, reality had claimed dominance. The party was over.

Soberly, she stumbled across the empty stage, which now lacked life.

"You cheated!" Doctor Prodigium screamed in an outrage, meeting her centre stage. Now, just a tiny old man in a ridiculous suit. His cohort, the big top, unadding. "Why, you have ruined my entire evening! No. I resist to return to this dreary reality. We shall have one more act yet!"

He reached a hand into his jacket. Susan screamed as she confronted Doctor Prodigium. This time, it was not a scream of terror. No, it was a battle cry.

The two collapsed to the stage in a heap. Doctor Prodigium wielded his cane and beat her violently over the head with it. A blow landed squarely between her eyes and drew blood. Another one found her nose with a satisfying crack.

"The show," Doctor Prodigium said, doggedly, unsheathing the dagger from his cane, the one with the brass handle, "the show must go on!"

Susan groped blindly with her hands. When her fingers discovered the wooden stool, she grasped it tightly. Just as Doctor Prodigium swung the blade, Susan thrust it forward with all of her remaining strength. It was flimsy, but it served. The last two legs found Doctor Prodigium's eyes and brought it all home.

He screamed in mortal agony and buckled to his knees.

"The show's over, you bastard."

His cries echoed loud throughout the empty walls of the big top as Susan staggered headlong towards the exit.

On her way, she observed the reality—the horrific reality—of Doctor Prodigium’s traveling circus. Karen lay on the stage with a broken neck, very much dead. Beside her was a standard steel ladder, no more than thirty feet high, from which she had fallen. There had been no high-wire act. Steve’s lifeless body sat in a crimson pool. There had been no knife throwers act either. He had simply been stabbed to grisly death. His corpse bore five puncture holes, including the fatal neck laceration.

In a moment of inspiration, Susan fished the Bic lighter out of Steve’s pocket. After making her exit from big top she snapped it to life and held the flame to one of the corners of the tent. She had to chase it with her hand, which was trembling. But when the thin polyester caught, it caught quickly.

Doctor Prodigium’s demonstration of anguish issued loud from inside as Susan ran through the carnival where a sign advertised; *Be sure to come again! Open all season!*

Suddenly, Doctor Prodigium stopped screaming. His hands fell from his bloodied eyes in a stupor.

Was that?

It was... Light!

(the tent ablaze)

He couldn’t perceive anything but the faint recognition of the light through his gouged eyes, but it was there. Bright and blinding. The house lights! And was that... heat?

(the polyester smouldering)

Yes! The remarkable warm glow of the spotlights was back on him. Bathing him in an ecstasy of euphoria. The music had also resumed.

(the flames rising)

Faint, but still audible. Crackling and popping sounds that could only have been the drums. The audience too! Hissing in communication with each other. Roaring with applause. And the smells!

(the smoke entombing the big top)

The burning of popcorn, the scorching of corndogs. He could smell the delicious smoke swirling all around him. The magic of the circus was back.

Doctor Prodigium rose and blindly groped among the aisles, waving to the empty seats and absent spectators, announcing his triumphant return. Inhabiting the first seat that his feet found, he reclined his head back and smiled as the big top burned in a wonderful spectacle all around

him.

THE END

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Sherlock Holmes and the Beast-men of Atlantis

Milly 'Mad Dog'
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[Return to Contents](#)

A CURLED MOUTH by Joseph J Patchen

Normally I would welcome merriment of all sorts in my house. Hell, these days I welcome merriment anywhere between me and a five hundred mile radius. I have learned that a meaningful life is a joyful life.

After an eternity shackled in a loveless marriage whose sober moments promoted a smiles free agenda, I have devoted my remaining years to seek out places and people who believe simply in fun.

But it is 3:30 am. That is in the morning. I need my rest from a long day which has been the product of a long week. I need my sleep so I can once again function in a world that I have discovered with a wide eyed anticipation.

Are those glasses I hear clinking? I live alone. I live by myself. I don't even so much have a goldfish or a parakeet. I live here solely and alone by design. I have no guests; no roommates; no girlfriends, not even a fiancée.

I seek my fun elsewhere; offsite, not seeking any entanglements that could later ruin things.

I am alone. Yet I can hear what I perceive to be a party going on down the hall.

I don't own a television or a radio. I can't stream on a computer. With my divorce barely completed it will be some time before I can access funds in such an amount to purchase such luxuries.

My stomach and intestines are ill, but not my mind. My intellect is as sharp as any razor or knife. And I am well versed in both. But then again if my stomach and intestines are ill it may be because of a choice my mind made for nourishment or what my intellect hastily deduced to be the best recipe.

I want to shout at these interlopers. I want to call the police. But I am vulnerable here in the bedroom. I am so tired, and I failed to bring any weapon with me. I never thought I should. I have to be careful.

From the sounds I gather there are at least three young women; full of life in my kitchen. They are speaking hurriedly in short phrases and laughing at each pause. They are happy, so greatly so.

As my feet touch my sleepers, their voices increase in volume; as I step to door I can discern even more voices and as I enter my hall, the light from the kitchen is blinding.

A strange slapping sound now enters the verbal fray; it sound as though pieces of something, a wet something are falling from a height on the floor. With each slap, my invaders roar louder and louder in laughter.

As my eyes adjust to the light I can see women, young and shapely women standing and moving about and yet surrounding something in my kitchen. They don't notice me as I walk down the hall. They don't stop their partying as I draw closer.

As I hit the doorway my throat clenches. My sinuses pour as the most acrid aroma smacks me in the face. My stomach, already in turmoil, turns and I dry heave into the blood and animal tissue that soaks the floor all around the room.

The women are barefoot and young; each attractive and dressed scantily. They seem familiar to me but I can't process why. I am overcome from the scene playing out in front of me.

I wave my arms and hands because my voice has now failed.

Still the women don't look up. They don't look at me. They are otherwise engaged. They are otherwise fascinated, each and together with mutilating a corpse; a levitated corpse just hovering in the middle of their round just where their mouths are and where they can chew on it.

And if they are not biting on this body, as if it were a delicacy, their hands are digging into the flesh so they can pull things out of it, picking away simply to eat.

They clink one another's glasses, filled to the brim, sloshing and spilling blood and what appears to be bodily tissue and waste with each chew and swallow. My, I do know who they are.

They are surrounding this body like a wild pack of animals, devouring and gorging themselves on organs.

I try to touch one of the girls placing my hand on a shapely bare shoulder, but my attempt passes right through. I try to run but my legs stiffen and my feet are riveted in place.

And that is when I realize the greatest mystery of all is in front of me. The day each of us will know has come to fruition. My cows have come home to roost with eight slices of karma. I am dead, I can clearly see this and my physical form is disappearing before me into the mouths of those bloated corpses I have left behind.

I should be horrified, but my nightmares have never caused terror.

I should be in pain but I am a disappearing piece of ectoplasm.

I should be angry, but I lived my life knowing that each day we can all be prey.

Fading, I understand where I will next be. I will have to atone for my life and my practices, just as the spirits of these women have long ago when I sent them to another realm.

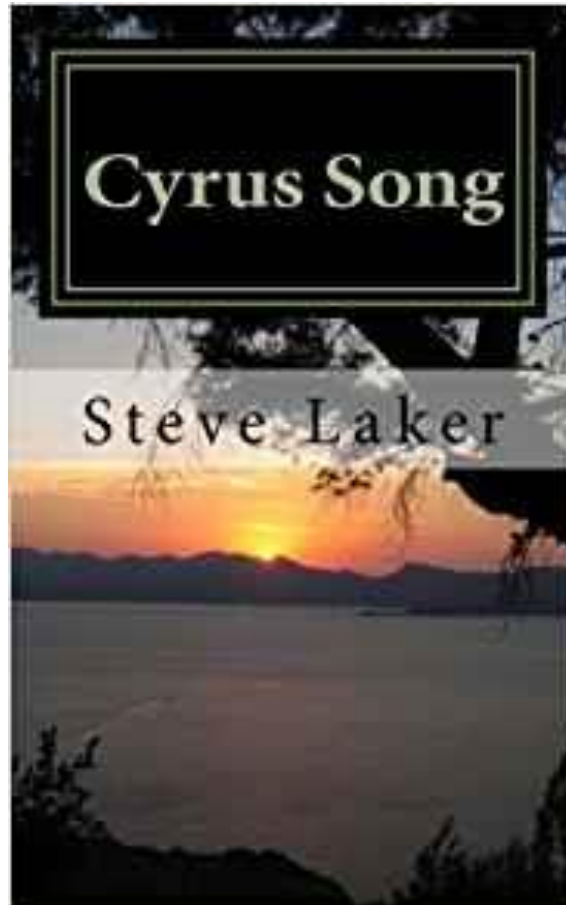
Irony that while I may not be happy but I clearly understand; my only disappointment is the silly smile they carved on my face leaving a curled mouth.

Despite my impeccable work on this level of existence leaving the remains of throw away women unknown and securing the remains of other woman to be unfound; just look at me. Is this any way to end one's life?

What a stupid smile.

The Devil will surely make fun of me.

THE END



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[Return to Contents](#)

CROSS COUNTRY by Rob Bliss

Officers Briggs and Malone were on a routine patrol, fresh coffee from the drive-thru steaming in their cruiser, helping to wake them up. Sunday night in a county of small towns, dirt roads passing darkened farm houses, the long single-lane highway that ran across the entire country. Their patrol turf. The biggest threat to police were deer and moose crossing the unlit roads.

Malone was driving, two years on the force, still learning the ropes. He had never fired his weapon at a person, never even seen a suicide. Traffic stops, driving under the influence, teenage parties cranked up too loud, the occasional pot grow-op in a field. He felt like a babysitter to the community, not a law enforcement officer. Figured he'd have to do the hack work before he made it. Was hoping to make detective someday. He and his wife had a six-month-old at home.

Briggs had spent thirty years as a cop, in a city of millions first, seen it all, fired his weapon multiple times, killed a few. He had seen death in all its forms, corruption amongst the civilian and police populations. Knew which politicians were crooked and got away with it. And he knew to keep his mouth shut if he wanted to keep his job, or live. Got on with a rural force, hoping to lessen his chances of catching a bullet in the tranquil countryside. He had survived this long, and only wanted to survive a little longer until he retired in a few years.

Retirement was all he seemed to talk about on the long drives.

"You gotta think about the future," he told Malone. "The goddamn pension they give you can't keep you going into old age. Hell, I've heard of some cops dealing drugs to put something away. I'm not saying to do that shit. Just let your money make money. They wanted to put me behind a desk, but I said to hell with it. I'll move to another force, quieter, safer. I'm old but I ain't dead. I'm telling you, Malone, as soon as you retire, you're dead. I say, die some place warm with girls in bikinis serving drinks on the beach."

Malone chuckled politely as Briggs laughed from the belly. The younger man let the older talk, and told himself that a cop couldn't choose his partner.

A truck on the road ahead had a busted taillight. Larger than a cube van, double-axel diesel with a roll-up rear door. Malone hit the flashers and siren.

The officers got out of their cruiser, approached the truck from either side. Malone asked the driver for his license and insurance while Briggs shone a flashlight into the cab, onto the floorboards, up to the driver's face. An Asian man, Chinese, hard-edged, pock-marked cheekbones, sweating and nervous.

Malone took the information back to the cruiser as Briggs looked at the man, recognizing him from somewhere.

"What's your name?" Briggs asked.

"Wan," the man said with a thick accent.

Briggs peered at the man and nodded. "I know you, though we've never met. We have mutual friends."

Malone returned to the driver, handed his identification back, told him to get his taillight fixed as soon as possible.

A bang sounded from inside the truck, accompanied by the sound of a child crying.

Malone drew his weapon, told the driver to exit the van, open the back. He didn't see Briggs shuffle back to the cruiser, dip inside the passenger door, turn off the camera under the rear view mirror filming the traffic stop.

The back door of the truck clattered up and, in the cruiser's headlights, Malone saw the faces and emaciated bodies of Chinese women and children packed into the van.

The younger cop told the driver to lay flat on his stomach on the ground, hands folded behind his head. The driver did, and Malone held his gun on him.

He looked up to see Briggs pointing his gun at him. Before a word was spoken, the older cop put a bullet through the young cop's forehead, then one through the chest. Briggs told the driver to get to his feet, watch out for the blood.

Then he pointed his gun at the roll-up door. "Pull that goddamn thing down before someone else comes along." The driver did, telling the women and children to shut the fuck up or they'll die, before the door slammed down and locked. "How far you going?" Briggs asked.

"Arizona. Then switch, get more, tractor-trailer for long haul to Chicago. Better truck, soundproof," he said as he banged a small fist on the door.

Briggs sighed and put his gun back in his holster. "Better be. I'm too goddamn close to retirement, I don't need this shit. Then I'm outa this backwoods shithole, probably outa this country. Maybe head to your country ... where cops are crooked and know the value of a good bribe." He smiled and the driver smiled with him. "Get that goddamn light fixed. You got lucky this time. Not a lot of us cross-country you can rely on to save your ass."

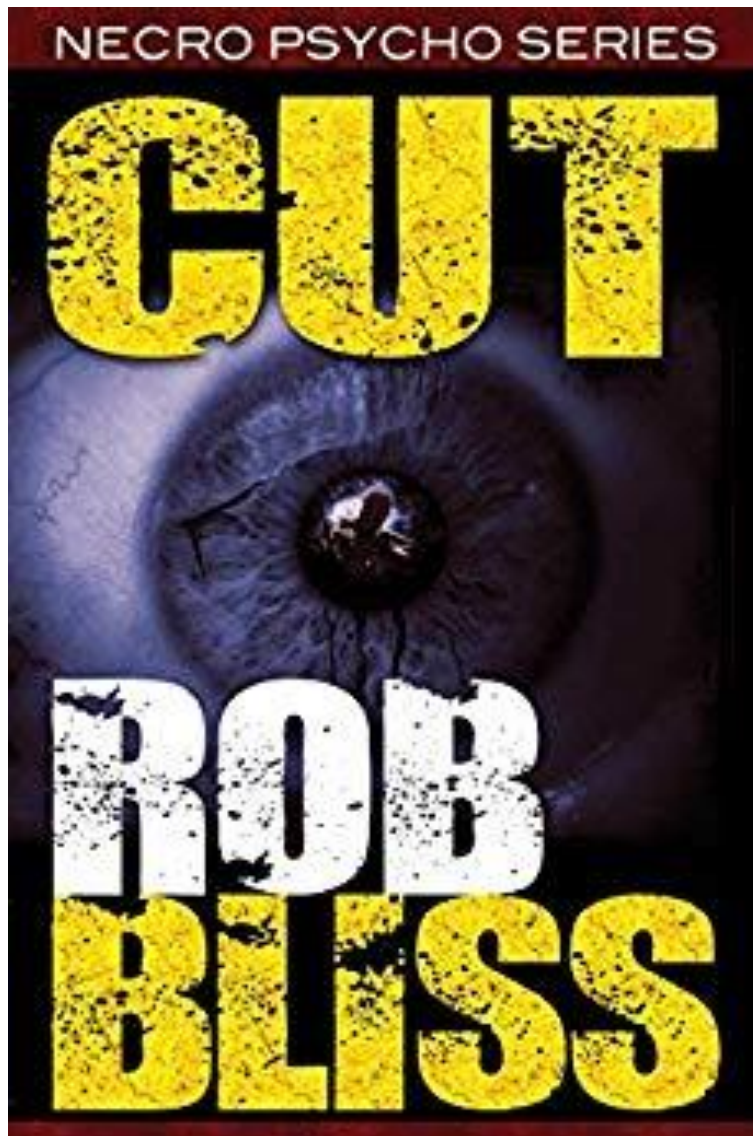
The driver bowed quickly and got into the truck, cranked the ignition, and rumbled back down the dark highway.

Briggs looked down at his dead partner, swore to himself in a whisper. Took Malone's gun and shot a few holes into the windshield and camera of the cruiser. Shot another two into the dark forest at the edge of the highway. Threw the gun far into the ditch. Took out his gun and fired a few rounds into the asphalt road and gravel median at different angles. Shot out one of the cruiser's headlights.

Saved the last bullet for his left thigh. Dragged a blood trail through the gravel to the driver's

side of the cruiser, reached inside to grab the mic of the radio, and called it in.

THE END



[Return to Contents](#)

THE FLAW OF ATTRACTION by Chris Tutty

George Spratt had heard that the ‘best’ way to get what you wanted was to ‘project’ the fact that you wanted it. A branch of New Thought, popularised and enthused over by a stupefying number of authors and media figures, stated that fate, the world, the universe, everything, would conspire to help you achieve your goals if you only had the right frame of mind. The zealous adherents of this ‘law’ (a law!) would insist with the fervour of the new religious convert that this unfathomably huge universe orchestrated events to fall into alignment for you if the correct mind-set were assumed. Pseudoscientific arguments for the theory’s effectiveness were put forth by butchering scientific understanding of the electrical activity of the brain, and the lack of hard, empirical evidence of the theory’s effectiveness should have relegated it to the New Age movement’s outer fringe. George couldn’t decide whether he should laugh or cry that the proponents were blind to this.

When George had been a boy, even up to his mid-teenage years, he might have thought the concept had some credence. The onset of reality, the understanding that the world at large and on a much more localized scale was a hateful and sardonic thing, had been late in hitting him. It was probably, he thought now, a kind of face-saving denial, the delusional hope that things simply had to get better and that dismal school years would segue into a fertile, opportunity-laden adulthood. The mind-set engendered by lack of opportunity, a face that could charitably be called homely, and jokes at his expense and just within earshot, made with the consistency of day into night, was a mind-set that was enlightened in a way that cheerful, cloyingly optimistic pseudo-celebrities and lifestyle pundits would not understand.

George knew that he was not handsome, not rich, not charismatic, not likeable (although this was not for want of trying), no, but he was in tune with reality. Essentially, George knew that the way the universe really worked was: shit happens. If you wanted something, contrary to those propagating the silly idea that a positive and saccharine outlook was the key, you were almost certain to find hurdles in competition with each other to see which could obstruct you first. You did not attract the things you wanted. The things you wanted did not so much play hide-and-seek with you as take out a restraining order against you, especially when you possessed the dubious blessings of someone like George. He would be quick to ask any believer in the ‘law’ if perhaps the countless starving and diseased wretches in poor and war-torn countries had only themselves to blame for not visualising health, nutrition and peace hard enough. This, he knew, was the stupidity of this philosophy of attraction. He wished someone would ask for his viewpoint so that he could watch them squirm under his logic. For him and many people like him, life was a protracted kick in the teeth.

He finished the article in the Sunday supplement about the power of positive thinking and its guaranteed results and threw the magazine furiously at the wall. He sacrificed accuracy for velocity and sent the Iron Maiden CD on the edge of his stereo table clattering to the floor. It fell a good three-and-a-half feet and he didn’t need to investigate to know that the plastic case would be cracked. He sighed and ran his hands through his hair, which was wavy and the colour of a fresh carrot. He would have liked to have seen Iron Maiden in their mid-eighties ascendance. Powerful, dynamic, creative, exciting, and with a catalogue of recordings packaged behind those spectacular Derek Riggs covers. To have been born twenty years earlier than he had been, to live

though the eighties as a young adult, to see the things of his childhood that he still cherished through an adult's eyes...if he could have 'attracted' what he wanted, he would have lived as an earlier version of himself, one who would live fearlessly and get what he wanted through hard work and determination, not from nonsensical 'visualisation' or 'alignment.' No meek pandering to teachers or co-workers or anyone else, either.

He crossed the living room and put the crumpled magazine and the cracked CD case back on the table. He sneered. I want to be me again, in the Eighties, he told himself.

He was seized by a crippling sensation of nausea and felt the room spinning as though he were drunk. He retched, gulped, and vomited his breakfast over the carpet. It was an old carpet in an ugly pattern of maroon and mustard yellow, and a voice somewhere towards the back of his mind told him that the regurgitation might even have improved the décor. Breathing heavily and blinking to clear his vision, he wondered if he had lost his mind when a voice brought him shooting back to his senses—senses, ha!

'Not looking too hot there, Georgy-boy,' said a voice that was oddly familiar and yet came from a stranger's lips.

He looked around and found his interloper standing behind him, offering a hand to help him up.

'Who the bloody hell are you and how did you get in?' George demanded, ignoring the proffered hand and certain that the doors and windows were locked—how had this man got in?

'Who indeed,' said the stranger in that uncanny voice.

'Well?' George spluttered, not knowing whether to reach for the phone to call the police or take a swing at the stranger.

'Can't tell?' the stranger asked. 'If I were anyone else I should probably be insulted, but I've been in your shoes before...literally, as it happens.'

George was now sure that the man deranged. 'No, I can't "tell", and you can tell me now or I'll fuc...'

'Settle down,' the stranger interrupted. 'I'm you.'

For some reason, George didn't doubt him. Incredulous as he knew he should be, the features were all there. The man was probably in his mid-sixties but there was no mistaking the resemblance: watery blue eyes, thin, slightly crooked nose, weak chin, the abundant freckles...

George looked closer still. The man had a reddish complexion and snow-white hair, and George knew that in decades past those colours would have been reversed. He would have looked just like...George. The man was dressed in a plain grey shirt and loose grey trousers that George couldn't quite fathom; there was something indefinable about the clothing, neither old-fashioned nor contemporary and neither stylish nor dowdy. It was as though the garments did not belong to

any era but were representative of all the fashion periods of the man's life distilled into a single outfit.

'Well done, lad,' said the man who was no longer a stranger. 'You recognize yourself.'

George, for all that he was baffled at being face-to-face with the Ghost-of-George's-future, nodded in acquiescence.

'You're an odd-looking little thing,' future-George said, 'but you aren't stupid. You know the truth when you see it, even when it takes a while to filter through the old synapses. You wanted to change things, and you can.'

'Come off it,' George scoffed. 'You're telling me that the attraction crap actually works?'

'I didn't say that,' said the stranger, 'but there's always a way out, even if it's not the way those New-Thought pseudoscientists would have you believe. You—me, once—want to live in a different time, as a different you, and leave the monotony and the disappointment behind. But it would take effort, George. The question is, if you had the chance, would you put that effort in? Let's go and find out.'

He reached forward and put a hand on George's shoulder, and the room spun again.

After what seemed like both an eternity and an instant, George's nausea and eye-watering disorientation passed and he found himself and his older-self standing side by side, looking at... 'Me?' he croaked.

'You, me, us,' said the older-George. They were still in George's living room, but now there was a third player in this bizarre game. The man before them was not taller, better-looking, or otherwise more desirable than George had been in the life he had somehow just been sucked out of. This third George was clad in tight blue jeans and a slightly too-small t-shirt in a blue-and-white hoop pattern. His hair was longer and shaggier than George would ever have worn it, and he was surprised to see a lit cigarette dangling from third-George's lips. He was inspecting a twelve-inch vinyl record in its sleeve, and real-George recognized it at once from its cover: the sandy-coloured pyramid and statues and azure sky of *Powerslave*, the fifth Iron Maiden effort. In place of the stereo-CD player on his table was a contemporary stylus, records stacked neatly behind it in place of the CDs he was accustomed to.

'What's going on?' asked real-George bemusedly.

'You're admiring your new purchase,' said older-George. 'It's September 4th, 1984. The record came out yesterday but you finished work late and couldn't make it to the record shop until today.'

George looked back and forth between his future and would-be past selves.

'Wh... what do I do for a living?' he asked.

‘You sell electronics,’ said older-George. ‘They’re all the rage, the way internet-based things are in the time you’re more familiar with. Stereos, televisions, computers with a whopping eight-bit memory capacity. You’re living through the Eighties but still don’t have what you want.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Simple,’ older-George explained. ‘This is you in the decade you wanted to live in. Doesn’t mean that you’ll appreciate it. Doesn’t mean you’ll see it through your twenty-first century eyes. Doesn’t mean you’ll find it any more satisfying.’

George’s brow furrowed as he looked back at his would-be Eighties self. The latter was carefully removing the record from the sleeve and setting it on the turntable.

‘It must be better somehow!’ George protested to his older counterpart. ‘Aren’t I richer? More popular, more fulfilled or something?’

Older-George shrugged. ‘You don’t earn a lot. You still work at the bottom of the pile. You see, George, you’re one of those small, sad little people who always dreams big but never does a thing about it. There’s still too much of the scared little boy in you.’

Before the words had even sunk in, the dramatic opening bars of the album’s opening number, ‘Aces High,’ kicked in and George watched as Eighties-George began nodding his head in appreciation.

Real-George looked imploringly at his snow-haired future self. ‘I’m...’

‘It’s a sad fact,’ said the older-George, ‘but it’s the way things are. Do you know the saying, “the more things change, the more they stay the same”?’

George could only nod his red head dumbly.

‘That’s the way it is for millions of people just like you.’

‘There’s no-one like m...’ George began with sudden vitriol.

‘There are plenty of people like you!’ older-George cut him off with asperity. ‘Look around this room—not one but three people who aren’t just like you but are you! You aren’t special. I’m not special. Your would-be past-self banging his head to the music over there isn’t special no matter how badly you want to live as him. Life is much the same for the unambitious wallflowers of this world, George. This past self sells his appliances, reads the tabloids and enjoys the four TV channels, just like everyone else did then. Just another you. Just another nobody.’

George felt his breathing losing its cadence. He shook his head and tried to focus on his past-self. The truth started to sink in; this George that might-have-been was, other than the embarrassing mullet hairstyle, little different from the George of the 21st Century. He was the same timid,

spiteful little man. He was the same wage-slave living in a small, badly furnished flat. He looked around at the place and saw that if anything, this alternate, past self he had manifested was even worse than the one he had left—the novelty he hoped for was not apparent to Eighties-George. How could it be? Life was not novel; nostalgia or longing for an era past was only ‘novel’ precisely because it was viewed from a position of looking back!

He staggered over to the window and propped his weak, pasty arms on the sill. The emotional half of his brain reeled whilst the analytical side scanned the street below in the hope of distraction, even if just to give him a few seconds’ respite. The buildings were mostly unchanged from his own time, other than the shopfront of the newsagents across the street being painted in a different font and the occasional front door or shutter being coloured differently. Elsewhere, the most notable difference was the boxier, less streamlined shape of the cars parked along the kerbside. Other than that, the sun shone, the early-September breeze blew, and the odd pedestrian went nonchalantly about their business.

‘Take me away,’ he said in the numb, faint voice of one realising a miserable and inescapable truth.

‘I’m glad you’ve come to your senses,’ said older George.

The room spun again, and George stumbled over and couldn’t help reaching out to grasp at that ugly carpet as though to hold on in case it threw him off into some abyss, which for all he knew it might. The feeling of holding on for dear life to some weird metaphysical merry-go-round slowly eased off, and he recovered enough of his senses to feel a faint tickling under his nose. Raising a finger to his upper lip, he wiped away a trickle of blood; the shift in time had burst blood vessels in his sinuses.

‘Does it have to be so nauseating?’ he stammered.

‘All part of the learning experience,’ said his future-self, who, George noted, did not seem discomfited in the least.

George staggered to his feet and looked around. ‘This...isn’t right,’ he managed.

He was still in his flat, but quickly discerned that his temporal morality lesson wasn’t over. Things in the flat were not as they had been. Things were newer than the time he had just left, but his stereo was now larger, blockier CD/cassette player than the smaller, sleeker appliance of the age he belonged to.

‘Well spotted,’ said older-George. ‘It’s October 7th, 1995.’

The door to the living room opened and George saw his third-self enter with a small plastic bag in one hand. He briefly took in this incarnation of himself clad in a flannel shirt and with a floppy, centre-parted haircut that he would never have considered a good look in the twenty-first century. Third-George reached into the carrier bag and removed a CD which he set it down in front of the stereo. The real George barely clapped eyes on the CD yet recognised it

immediately: The X Factor, the Maiden album released a few days before this date. Its cover was a dull grey illustration fitting for a dull grey decade. Not just for him, but for society at large; after the glitz and excess of the Eighties, the new decade had reacted as though seeing the Eighties as a set of embarrassing photographs of a debauched night on the town from the perspective of a regretful, hungover morning. Glitz and exuberance were suddenly out, grey, self-induced nihilism was in. Most of the rock stars of the Eighties had looked like glitzy superheroes; their Nineties counterparts looked like off-duty lumberjacks.

George wondered faintly why he had only acquired the gloomy new Maiden album now, on October 7th, instead of on its day of release a few days before. Then he took in his third-self's lugubrious expression and defeated body language, his drab clothing and his air of capitulation. The George of the twenty-first century shook his head and demanded aloud what else he should know about being here in the Nineties as an adult.

If the Eighties had been the decade he longed for, the Nineties were years he desperately wished he could forget, or at least try again with a different mind-set. As if reading his thoughts—and why wouldn't he know them, given that the two were the same person?—older-George explained: 'No, lad, you could try to be a bit more resilient, but you'd give in sooner or later and show yourself up for the same milksop you've always been.'

George winced as he remembered. For him, the real George, the mid-to-late-nineties had been his school years. To be named George amidst a generation of Aarons, Darrens and Lees was to invite ridicule and taunts even without being red-haired, short and uncoordinated. He had absorbed the bullying like a sponge, and would never be able to get the other boys' chant out of his head:

*Ginger George, Ginger George, Ginger George Spratt
Is your Mum a ginger too, does she have a ginger twat?*

He faced his older self. 'What am I doing as an adult here?'

'A fine question,' said older-George. He pointed at mid-Nineties George, who had left the CD on the table and was heading for the kitchen. 'This version of you stacks shelves at a supermarket.'

'There's nothing wrong with that,' George protested limply.

'Of course there's not,' said older-George, 'but it's as far as you ever go here as an adult. You trudge off to work, stack your tins and bottles, come home, and listen to your music. Not a thing wrong there. But for what? What's your legacy going to be? What mark will you leave on the world?'

George knew that the answer was as blank as the walls of the flat that he could never be bothered to decorate, then or now.

‘You never made a resolution in your life,’ said older-George, ‘and you turned self-defeat into an art form. You just made do with whatever you could and ended up as me, coming to drive it home to you.

‘You see, another thing you need to learn is this: it doesn’t matter when I take you. I could show you yourself here in a Bronze-age hut or a fully-interactive home with a robotic servant hundreds of years in the future; it would be the same. You’ve got no drive, not now, not in the Eighties, not in the past or the future. You do things when you feel like it, not when you know you should, and you take plenty of pushing but never grow the balls to push back.’

George pinched himself on the arm to ensure this was not the daftest and cruellest dream he had ever suffered through. A slight burning pain and a localised reddening of freckled white skin told him that it was not.

‘I understand, now,’ he said.

‘I know,’ said older-George. ‘I was where you are, after all. The lesson is that you don’t attract what you want. You attract what you don’t want. Bullies, jobs that pay bills but nothing more, periods of staring at blank walls, wishing your life was better. If you want it to be better, you do something about it. Do I really need to go on?’

‘Take me home,’ said George.

The spinning and nausea came again, and he emerged in his own time in a heap on the floor. Everything was as he had left it and his wall calendar stared him in the face with the date he knew it to have been. His head ached from the time dislocation, and his misery was compounded as he looked down and realised that he had wet himself.

Older-George was nowhere to be seen, and George was about to begin the mammoth task of trying to figure out what he should do when he saw the Sunday magazine in the crumpled heap he had left it in. He crawled over to it and righted it, finding the pages parted at the cover story, a world-exclusive interview with Karen Mendez, the American singer/actress/model/lust object du jour. He had not read the article, having used the magazine as a missile after reading the pseudo-philosophical opinion piece on the fourth page.

His eyes alighted on a passage:

“‘Oh yeah, I would never have made it in this business without my mind-set,” says Mendez. “I focussed really hard and like, concentrating on what I wanted just made it come to me. It’s like I barely had to work for it so long as I believed that the universe was working to get me what I wanted, you know what I mean?” Her huge baby-blue eyes sparkle as she goes on. “You really do attract the things you want.”“

George rolled onto his back and laughed. He laughed, guffawed, and chuckled as he realised that all along, he could in fact have found the way out of his circuitous dead-end of an existence. The answer had been there all along, and he knew how to prove his future self wrong, in the process

erasing the whole ordeal that had led to this. There was only one thing he had to do, and it would only take a few moments' effort. He knew that he could rise from the pile of misery and make something of himself. In keeping with his perpetual defeatism and aversion to effort, though, he would not. He would do what he always had done: the thing that was easiest.

He felt the soft, sallow skin of his neck and throat, so thin and yielding, and looked towards the top drawer of his desk. He kept a knife in that drawer.

A very sharp knife.

THE END

[Return to Contents](#)

LOBSTER'S REVENGE by Jesse Zimmerman

Part Three

“Ah!” cries the big crispy lobster in his plain yet booming voice. “Crazy women! I can’t control them! Reinforcements!”

“Give me back my bloody sword!” yells the Challenger.

The kobolds, alphabolds, or whatever they are, move as one, turning their backs on their master, facing our elevated rocky perch. An army of little eyes and whiskered snouts peers at us, and I feel my knees turn to jelly, yet stand my ground, dagger in hand, no idea what to do with it. Sis swerves her loaded bow about like she always does, under a dozen arrows in her quiver, not nearly enough.

“We’re screwed,” I say quietly. I hear the footfalls of more kobolds approaching the chamber. They come from all directions of the chamber except directly below us. There must be tunnels in the walls.

“Let us go!” Fauna shouts, bold as ever.

“Yeah, that’ll work,” I murmur.

High-pitched laughter answers. Below us are the bulk of them, all gathered in a massive cluster that is thickest directly under the lip of the perch. I now see the Challenger is taking this moment to do something. He’s fiddling with his two hands behind his back and, within seconds, he has untied the ropes that had bound his wrist. This is our chance!

“Come on, you weaklings!” I shout. “We’ve slain dozens of kobolds already by throwing pebbles at them!”

Fauna downs one kobold as they rush forward, and then another, before having to duck a trio of pointed shafts. They’re chucking their spears.

I, having no projectile weaponry, have slinked backward. There is nowhere to go, so I kneel beside Fauna as four more spears hit the rock wall above and clatter upon the floor, two spears landing two inches from me.

“Idiots,” she mutters with a classic Fauna laugh, ducking beside me. We both jump up really quick and then drop again. More spears. We have ten now on the floor beside us. Fauna gets up, launches an arrow, and hides once again, shouting: “Stop killing us!” down at the foes mockingly.

“Okay, one,” she starts counting, putting her bow on the floor, grabbing a spear in each of her hands while I do the same. “Two...”

“Three!” I finish and we both stand, chucking our four missiles.

She hits two. I hit two, and then we fall in time to avoid getting skewered by a line of three spears aimed right at us. We repeat this, the kobolds seemingly not catching on to our method. We take out three, four, five, six, seven...the luckless creatures scream, one of them, only grazed, goes flying towards the back of the room where the big bipedal lobster roars in frustration, waving his big claws above his face.

This is when I see the Challenger already punching his way through the kobolds, dodging spear thrusts and axe slices, sending a flying kick into one of the big one's faces. He grabs a spear from another then, spins about in a wide circle, cleaving apart all the kobolds surrounding him before the spear snaps apart in his hands on a charging axe blade. He head-butts the axe-wielder.

Fauna raises herself, shouting to the ranger, throwing a fresh spear clear across the chamber. He catches it and continues fighting, felling another two before a fresh circle of fiends surrounds him.

“We have to help him!” Sis cries to me, pulling out her bow again, shooting a few arrows off, but to little avail. Kobolds are still chucking spears up at us when we decide to jump. The moment feels so hopeless so I just do it without thinking, landing hard on the floor of the chamber. The first kobold I see sneers at me, bringing the sharpened end of his spear toward my face. I manage to roll out of the way, catching sight of my sister leaping onto one of the tall brutes and going at his upper chest and back with her sword like mad. I get back up, dodging a furry foot, and now I can see the Challenger rushing towards us.

He fights with his new spear, leaving a trail of dead kobolds in his wake, a good ten living ones making chase after him. He yells: “Run!” as he speeds past us. My sister leaps off of the bloodied opponent and takes off after him and I follow, both of my legs sore from the jump and landing.

The path is clear before us at this far wall across from the throne, underneath our former perch spot. We see a set of big wooden doors, twice the width and height of a normal house door. Fauna reaches it first, her and the ranger pushing one door each. A small chamber sits just beyond it. We run inside, having no choice as the kobolds are mere feet from us. Fauna and the ranger slam the doors behind them. The Challenger takes his spear and uses it to bolt the door. There are four tall metal torches around the same length that we then take and bolt across the door as well, leaving only one torch standing to keep the room lit. The big doors quake as we hear the creatures pushing their weight against it. And then we hear the sound of axes hacking.

The chamber, as stated above, is small, no bigger than my room at home (which is quite big for a bedroom). To our left and right, about ten paces on both sides, are grey rock walls, the ceiling lower in here, about seven feet high. There are no doors or windows or passageways or anything we can escape through. At the far wall from us, another ten paces away in this square-shaped room sits an immense black cauldron, as big and wide as an aristocrat's bathtub, bubbling to the brim with green ooze.

“This must be the antidote!” I cry.

“Oh, how observational of you,” says my sister.

“This is it,” agrees the Challenger. I hug him, so glad he is okay. At first, he doesn’t hug back, but then he puts his arms about my shoulders and I see one of the rare times that he smiles.

“Thanks for coming to get me, guys,” he says, patting my sister on the back. She nods, but has no time to smile.

“Okay, let’s not get ahead of ourselves in celebrating,” I say.

“Not ahead of ourselves!” a shrill voice calls from behind us, whistling before repeating: “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves!”

Above and a bit to the right of the steaming cauldron rests a small iron, dome-shaped cage that hangs from a hook on the ceiling. Inside this cage sits a single bird about the size of a chicken, horrid in appearance for it is completely bald, has no feathers, looking more like a bird on a rotisserie spit than a living one.

And yet it whistles and then it speaks again: “It’s only temporary—only temporary!”

“What is?” asks Fauna.

Sharp crashing sounds echo against the doors behind us, shaking the whole wall.

“What’s only temporary?” I ask. “No wait, tell us how to get out of here?”

“The antidote,” the ranger says, stepping over to the brim of the cauldron. “This is what is only temporary.”

The bird flutters both of its fleshy wings at its side, cocking its head sideways and then right-side up again, and then sideways again. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves!”

“You said that already!” snaps Fauna, bringing up her bow, pointing the arrow at the birdcage. “And I’m still hungry!”

“You said that already! Still hungry!” the bird chirps while I extend my hand to lower my sister’s bow.

She looks to me and says: “We don’t have time!”

“Time!”

We all turn back to the bird. I notice now that the four letters ECHO are scrawled on the bottom of the birdcage. To my side the Challenger stamps his foot, peering over the side of the goop.

“No time to make more! Have to go back to source to get real stuff!” shrieks the bird.

“Yep,” mutters the Challenger, placing both of his hands on the cauldron’s brim. “It’s as bad as I thought, but at least it’s not permanent.” He seems to know something about this.

This whole time the doors behind us have still been shaking, the distinct sound of axes chopping into wood blended with the multitude of bloodcurdling yet anti-climactic war-screams. I spin about, seeing the first plank of wood splinter and a long whiskered snout stick inside the new space. Fauna turns about as well, shoots an arrow into the snout, and we both return our gaze to the talking bird.

“We need more! Need more! This batch is only temporary!”

Fauna moves to the side of the big pot, picking up a small yellow sack off the floor. It reads: *Birdseed*. “Let’s see how this works,” she says, tearing off the top of it and pouring it into the goo. Echo rattles the cage above, fluttering the meat-stick wings, the bird’s head frantically peering through the cage’s bars to peer below at the tiny seeds floating on the green surface.

I see where she’s going with this once she loads another arrow and fires it at the little chain that the birdcage is held up with, sending both it and the crazed bird into the goop, a massive lime-coloured bubble bursting above the sinking cage. For a moment I wonder why Sis bothered throwing the birdseed in if her plan was to sink the bird, but I figure this out soon enough.

“No time for tests!” declares the Challenger, leaning right over, putting his face into the goo while he shakes his head about. He flings his head back up, his slimed hair flying, sending bits of green everywhere, hitting me in the face.

“Ow! Why’d you do that for?” I yell at him, although I realize that we must do this.

Another wooden plank gets chopped behind us. Fauna replaces her arrow, shaking her head. “They’re coming!”

I scoop up a handful of the goo, gagging as I stick my hand in and feel its warmth, bringing a big slimy glob of it towards my mouth. It tastes—as I figured it would—disgusting! It reminds me of this cake that I baked with Mother when I was a little girl but had accidentally left out in the summer sun. As I force my tongue to lob creamy gunk to my throat, I remind myself of the impending danger. Fauna lets out a tiny, almost terrified, giggle, and then reaches into the bowl of goop, pulling out the birdcage. Inside is a bird so large the bars of the cage have already bent, while its ravenous bill begins to tear apart the front wall of it, the mutated creature quickly diving for its birdseed, gobbling it up along with more of the antidote. Fauna takes a mouthful next, in her hand like I did, her face scrunching up again like she had just swallowed a giant ball of salt, lemon juice, and earwax.

The Challenger dashes to the crumbling door. An axe blade swings through the door, lodging itself in the wood in front of the ranger, who promptly grabs the sharpest part with his two

fingers, pulling it from its wielder. A kobold's face appears in the hole. The Challenger punches with his free hand, sending the face back from whence it came. "Come on in!" he shouts, now swinging the axe, winking as he gives me a quick nod. "I feel it now! It takes only a moment! Things will seem to slow down when you rush, but it's not time, it's you!"

Things already feel different. My vision seems clear, like I can sort the things I see before me and focus on one thing at a time with all of my energy, ready to switch to another thing instantly if need be. I see one blow on the door, turning my gaze to its source, and then I see a furry claw reach in and grasp about. I move forward to stand beside the ranger. I breathe deep, feeling calm, and ask Fauna to join us.

"In a moment," she says. I hear the cauldron crash upon the floor behind me, feeling no need to look back to confirm that she has tipped over the antidote. I hear it stream into an unseen drain.

My sister emerges to my side, carrying her sword, her left hand clasped about the birdseed bag. She is larger than before, only slightly, but still noticeable, her sleeves having torn as her biceps bulged up. My arms and legs feel heavier, more powerful. The left door gives way completely, the wood falling off from its hinges, crashing to the ground, the edge of its broken surface landing directly in front of us. The right door bursts apart seconds later, revealing the first four rows of menacing alphabold soldiers, the very first six of them sneering and snapping their snouts as they leap into the room. Fauna moves first, turning her unarmed hand, flinging the contents of the little bag onto the front row of them, none of the them flinching, some laughing as they realize they'd been assaulted by birdseed.

A giant squawk rings up from behind me, and a small speeding brown object shoots towards the next kobold like a bolt of lightning. Echo the plucked, talking bird jumps from one birdseed covered kobold to the other, pecking faces, eyeballs, piercing chainmail and pulling out chunks of fur and flesh, the featherless creature moving so fast to be like a blur of speed to my eyes! Streams of black blood streak everywhere.

I haven't even made a single move yet!

Confident, I charge, making my way to the closest kobold to my right, the left and centre flanks already being taken care of by my sister, the ranger, and the frenzied bird. In this state it feels like the kobolds are weak once more, like things have just been reset to the way they were before. I don't even use my dagger on the first of them, just hit the nearest with my fist, sending him flying to the opposite wall. My new strength is immense! I feel bolder than ever when the next kobold shoots his spear at me, for I slice apart the shaft, and, with improved speed, kick the falling tip of it into the middle of the furry critter's body.

"Ouch!" he cries, grasping his belly. "That hurts, it does!"

"They're antidoted!" a raspy voice shouts before Fauna head-butts the source of it, sending him flying against the others behind. The alpha creatures begin fleeing, some dropping their spears, one of which I pick up, as Echo charges after them, shrieking: "Not enough! Need more! Need more!"

The Challenger and Fauna are covered in black blood, but appear as if they have barely broken a sweat. My sister has a big grin, flexing her arms for a moment, raising her sword above her cap. "I love this!" she yells.

"Welcome to my world," our ranger friend groans before raising his blackened axe and pointing it beyond the smashed door.

"Aye, let's crush Lobster-Man!" Fauna shouts.

"We must not allow him to escape!" the Challenger adds hastily. "If he finds out how to make this goo potion permanent, the world could be in very big trouble."

I am unsure of if he means that we must kill Lobster-Man, and I wonder if we could capture him, maybe take him back to Silver Coast as a prisoner, but before I can begin a conversation about the ethical issues, my two companions are out the doorway. I follow, stepping over a row of dead or dying kobolds. In the big chamber we see a tiny clearing before an entire army of alphabolds. They stand, spears and axes in their hairy paws, faces twisted in hideous scowls. The reinforcements have come. There must be nearly a hundred.

We hear, but do not see Lobster-Man: "Get them, my loyal followers and patrons! Get them, my buckos!"

They begin chanting in a dark speech, clashing their weaponry, stamping their feet, sifting their little tails. Fauna stands at my side, the Challenger at hers. Echo appears at my feet and says: "Alright mates, let's do this!" as he flexes his now muscled wings.

"Hm?" I ask, looking down to the naked bird. "Are you repeating something?"

Echo turns his neck to look at me and I think I see a smile at his beak: "For real now! I speak and understand! I was just playing dumb parrot before because I wasn't sure who you were! I have been playing dumb since these morons captured me!"

"Ah," I say. "Thanks, I guess."

"Before it wears off, let's strike! We might have a chance!" the bird chirps.

"I feel the chances are likely even," I say, for though we are stronger than they are, there are just too many of them.

"If I die, then at least I die taking these scums out!" spits my sister.

"Likewise," agrees the Challenger before bellowing a battle-cry, slashing his new axe madly before him. If the air in front of him could be hurt it would be in terrible agony now.

The first row of kobolds lunge and the rest follow, overwhelming my sight. All four of us begin

chopping our weapons (or beak) at once, readying to be overcome, but all steadfast in our desire to die upon our feet! I manage to tear apart one kobold's spear, kicking the foe from me, sending him into the two behind him, but then four others emerge where they fell, charging at me, slobbering as they swipe. I back up, nearing the rock wall behind me.

Just as I accept this is likely the end it happens.

One tall alphabold strikes his spear. I dodge it, moving to my left, and then duck as he pierces the air above my head. And as I rise again, I see that the humanoid beast is no longer taller than me, but half my size now! A swift slap flings him six feet from me.

Now I see it's happening to all of them! One by one the alphabolds shrink back into the diminutive kobolds we are used to.

"The antidote! Their effects must've worn out!" I cry in relief and amazement.

"Thanks narrator!" Fauna shouts back. "I still feel it!"

"As do I!" laughs the Challenger as the remaining army of kobolds diminishes into three-foot rat-beings, their little black eyes bulging as they realize their predicament. I see Lobster-Man standing now at the back of the room aside his throne, his blackened claw near his round chin. He looks worried.

Usually the Challenger and my sister would give me a quick instruction on how to strategically proceed but this time—nah!

We all just run in, slashing, hacking, pecking, kicking, and slapping.

I see the Challenger bash one tiny kobold's butt as it attempts to flee, sending the critter flying to the ceiling, shrieking as it gets impaled on a stalactite. Fauna, I see in that brief second when I charge forth and steal a spear, slashes her sword once from left to right, sending dozens to the farthest wall. The cowering mob moves as one mass of fur, this sea of brown bobbing heads revealing more and more of the cave floor as they retreat. Each of their pursuers position ourselves inward towards the fleeing wall of bodies, choosing our next targets.

Fauna is twirling now. I've never seen her move like this before, as if she were once a dancer, (which she never was), her body spinning while leaping at the kobolds, hitting them one by one, sending them flying forward, knocking over the ones in front of them. Closer to me, the ranger, with less space to move forward as she, for she so far has slain more, takes one big step, moving his right arm close enough to a trio of the running vermin, his axe swung downward and sideways, catching them and another four as he steps up.

In this moment, where I feel clear-headed, more able to put all of myself into perfect synch, than I have ever felt before, I decide to simply jump. It's dream-like when I push my feet off the cave-floor and jump float upward, halfway to the ceiling, and begin to fall forward, the tip of my right foot stepping onto the head of one kobold, my left foot kicking the back of the head of another. I

land in a crouching position, the other little beasts parting in fear as I jolt my back upward again and stretch out both of my arms to my sides. I feel hairy faces crash into them and, looking left and right, I see that I have clotheslined four in all, their feet flying out from beneath them as they fall onto the floor. Echo leaps upon one of ones I just knocked out; tiny tufts of fur fly everywhere about the bird while he mauls it like a floppy pillow.

The screams bounce off the walls and ceiling, causing the great chamber to shake. In our frenzied state, we feel each movement, the grounds beneath us seemingly rising and falling under our feet. I hear a crash, turning, seeing Lobster-Man falling over as the kobolds stream over and past him, a great piece of rock falling nearer the wall to my right. It crushes at least five of them. A stalactite plummets down next, falling on two kobolds, pinning them to the ground like flies in a bug museum.

Lobster-Man roars, raising his two claws above his head. "Stop running! You're supposed to be at the top of the hierarchy!"

"We're licked, we is!" one of the scampering scum cries out, passing the enraged crustacean.

As the remaining kobolds funnel into a pair of side-by-side tunnels, we hop over to Lobster-Man, stepping between the piles of the furry unlucky foes. The chamber stops shaking when the last of the living kobolds run out of it. Only Lobster-Man and ourselves remain.

Both of his claws fall to his sides. The red creature smiles as he eyes us. "So, this is it, my band of virtuous heroes? You warriors of justice and do-gooding!"

The Challenger spits, bending over to pick something up from one of the dead kobolds. "I am chaotic!" he then declares, leaning back up, waving a sword now, his sword!

"You stand in the way of order!" Lobster-Man hisses, pointing an accusing pincer.

"Where did you get the antidote from?" the ranger demands, looking ready to throw his axe with his other hand.

Lobster-Man laughs, his dry, monotone laughter in his irritating voice.

"Answer him!" Fauna barks, stepping towards him, ahead of the rest of us. I want to call to her to stop, and I feel the effects of the goo wearing off now as my normal cautiousness reasserts itself in my mind.

"Oh, you little girl? Why are you wearing that red carp, you want attention?" says the lobster.

Fauna starts after him first, the Challenger second, Echo third, me last. All our voices dart about the tunnel that Lobster-Man flees down. We hear heavy footfalls and hurried gasps just ahead of us, darkness overtaking our vision the further we follow. The antidote does not give us the ability to see in the dark! The tunnel floor goes flat soon, and then starts moving upward. The blackness lifts the further up we go, a disc of sunlight visible now further through this straight passage.

I can hear the others panting now, and I too am feeling tired. It must be some kind of hangover. I raise a hand over my brow, trying to see the circle of light ahead of us. It's the end of the tunnel, the surface. This is when I see a strange object moving towards the centre of the path of vision. It's a ship, for I see a single sail, a red sail upon a crimson hull.

"Drat!" curses Sister, unstrapping her bow. "He has one of those flying ships!"

"It's too late! Too late, it is!" squawks Echo, the fleshy bird slowly catching up to us. "Lobster-Man escapes! You will see him again, I am sure of it!"

"We will," says the Challenger, angrily slamming his sword against the rock-wall, taking a big gasp, bending over for a moment.

Beside me, Fauna takes off her cap, squeezing the rivers of sweat out of it. "I hope not," she says. "He's just a big red clown with the mind of a child. Blows my mind that anyone would ever listen to him."

"Well, we saw his fanbase," I agree, turning to our new bird friend, technically our second bird friend so far. "Hey, thanks for helping us!"

"Yeah!" says Fauna, putting her cap back on and tipping its brim towards him. "You know, we are on an ongoing quest. Why don't you join us?"

"Yeah, you could be a regular character!" adds the Challenger with an eager nod.

"No! No! I have a family and friends nearby! But now we know where there's some antidote!" Echo answers as he bops his head appreciatively. When we eventually reach the end of the tunnel and emerge into a sunlit meadow he parts from us, thanking us once more. Now the antidote is completely worn off and we are back to our normal selves.

Here there is no sign of Lobster-Man, just this idyllic scene with butterflies and puffy white clouds in a baby blue sky, a world that looks as if the horrors we had just encountered did not even exist. We take a rest further down the way near a calm green creek, and I wonder if this is a continuation of the creek we encountered at the start of our adventure. The Challenger is strangely silent. I catch him gazing out at the distance as if he is working some things over in his mind. I wonder what he knows about this antidote.

"Our quest continues," Fauna sighs. "But first, I'm starving!"

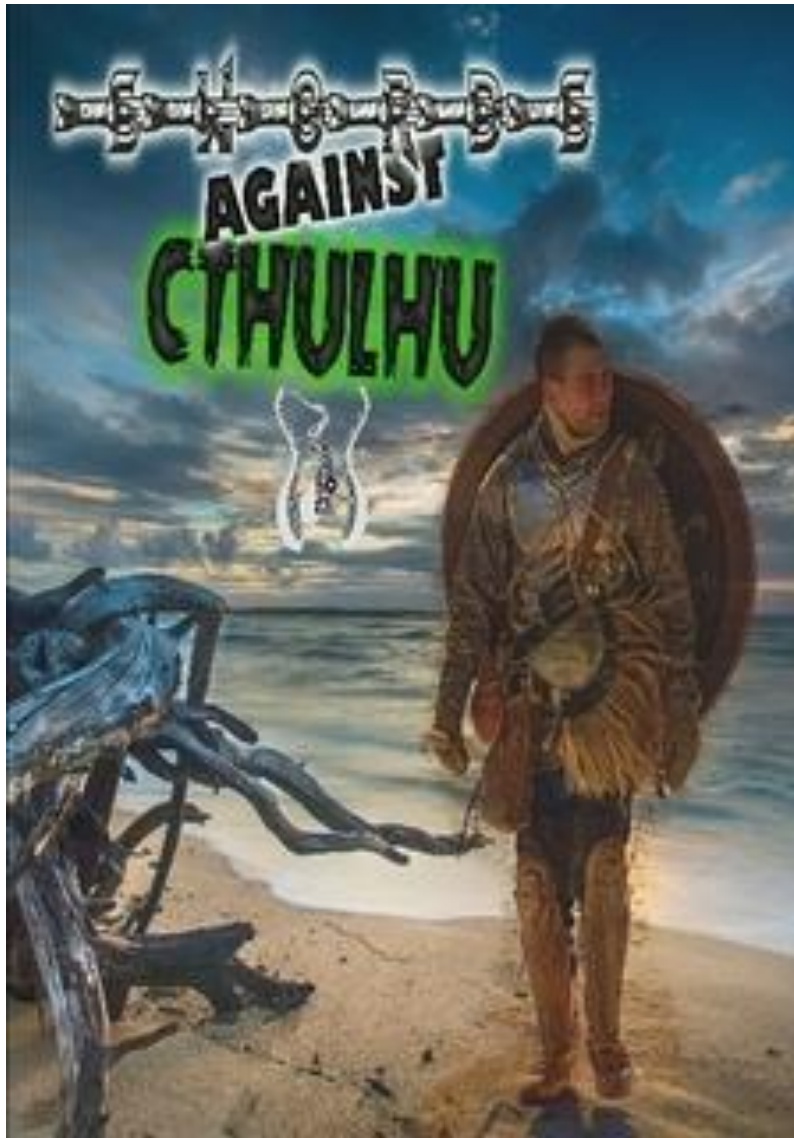
A big toad emerges from the bank of the creek, looking very much like the one that ate our food. It burps and from our spot we can vaguely smell honey and sirloin. Fauna chuckles, loading an arrow and letting loose.

Soon we got a nice fire going. Normally I wouldn't, but I'm hungry and tired and even a fried toad is helpful for getting that awful gooey aftertaste out.

THE END

Our trio will return in OMG...We Just Ate a Magic Toad...whoa...man...

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[Return to Contents](#)

THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Twenty-Two

Indeed she was a most deadly ship, the O8-111A. And Dimara had been constantly vigilant, not only in guarding the ship itself, but also in watching every step Carter Ward took once he left his ship, and began exploring the Derelict itself.

Dimara, unfortunately, was incapable of acting outside the confines of the O8-111A. She could observe to extremely small tolerances, and to extreme distances. She was not yet able to communicate outside the O8-111A, for that would require the manipulation of particles—however small—that lay outside her range.

So, though Dimara knew where Ward was at any given instant, she was largely unable to do anything to help him, except to fire off a round or two at any enemy prowling. Then she was quite devastating.

Dimara followed Ward's movements closely once he left the O-8111A. She watched as Kharl Stoff and his gang ransacked the cages strewn throughout the derelict as they tried to find him.

Ward was several times very close to being caught by them, but he easily eluded them each time. Dimara also noted it when, several hours later, Ward picked up a companion. A female human. Dimara smiled. Carter Ward did tolerate the company of the human female more than he did any other form of company. That was the one flaw in his character, one might say, if one were to define a flaw as that which leads to a downfall. But the company also seemed to give Ward a few moments of what could be called enjoyment. And since everything, animate and inanimate alike, must eventually crumble to nothing, having a fault of some sort may not be such a bad thing, especially as some faults may add a dash of character to an otherwise dull personality.

Turhan Mot studied the *Derelict* as his ship approached it. At first, the *Derelict* was but a speck of a shadow moving across the swiftly moving starfield of the Milky Way. Slowly and silently it grew in the darkness, a blackened and charred silhouette cutting through the sky.

Small yellow lights pierced the hull of the ancient ruin. Small and dim, they gleamed, tiny beacons that blinked, one by one, into appearance. The hulk took on the formless shape of a dead and beached whale. Ominous and silent, the Derelict blocked out all the gathering light of the stars.

Mokem Bet, putative commander of this mission, and the "*Dawnsmasher*," turned to Turhan Mot. We are ready to board," he said.

"Mokem Bet would do well, then," Turhan Mot replied, "to act as he sees fit."

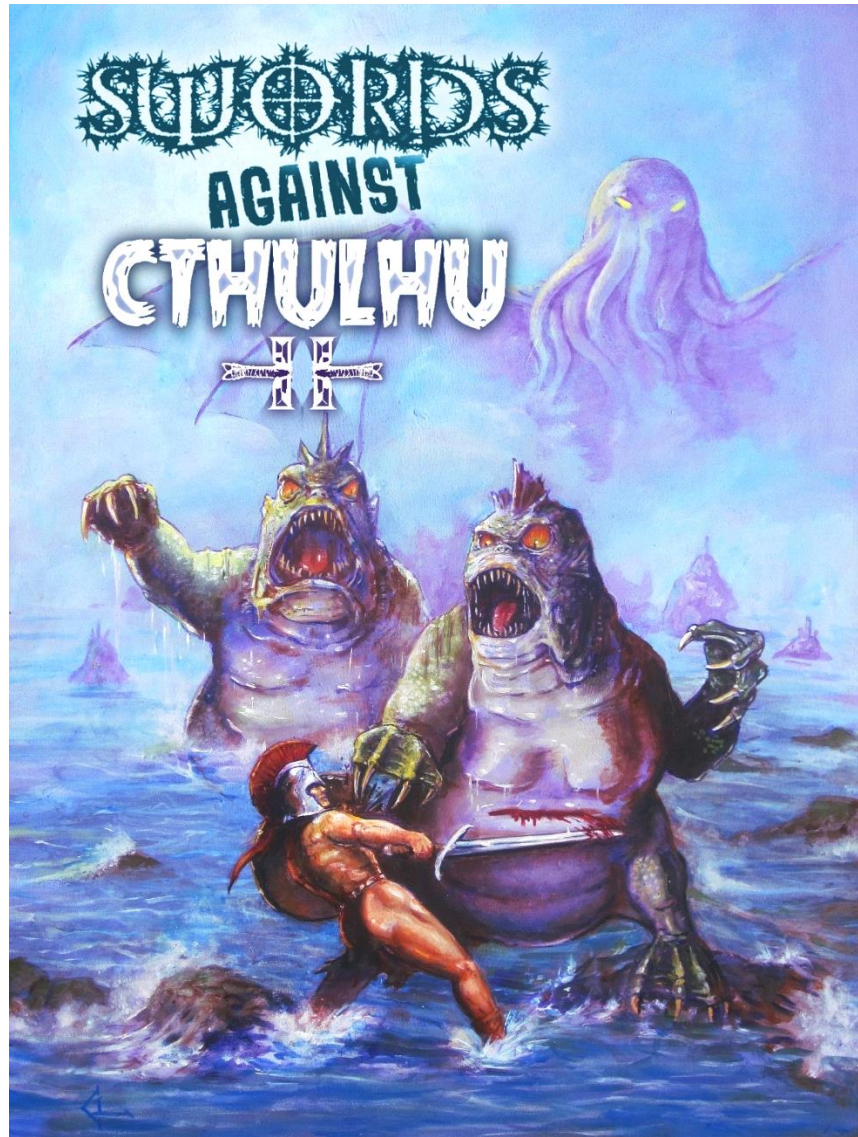
"And so we shall do," Mokem Bet answered, falling into a long-familiar pattern. "With gratitude to the great Turhan Mot for his willingness to share his experience with us. Tu Hit, steadfast at the wheel, was silent, falling himself into a familiar form, only but bowing his head to

acknowledge the discussion going on around him.

So Tu Hit silently carried out the commands, both explicit and implied. The ship that carried them moved toward the landing bay. It opened like a gaping maw of blackness that swallowed Mokem Bet's ship completely. For a moment, vision was gone. Dimly it returned, bringing with it huddled shapes and shadows of cages. Balconies overhead revealed the shadowy shapes of the crew that came to meet the ship. They swung down on lines and clambered down on long ladders, crowding the ship.

Hiding deep in the darkness of the hulk, and watching the approach of this new ship, were the shapes of a man and a woman. The man was Carter Ward. The woman called herself Lacey. On the opposite side of the landing bay was Carter Ward's own ship. He had only to wade his way through the crowds of crewmen massing to meet the incoming ship. Dimara was ready to open the outer hatches to let Ward in. But before he could make his way to her, the ship carrying Turhan Mot, Mokem Bet and Tu Hit entered the landing bay, and settled on the deck next to the O8-111A, blocking Ward's further progress.

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE



[Return to Contents](#)

ACROSS THE ZODIAC by Percy Greg

Chapter XXVIII—Darker Yet.

Leading Eveena from the room, I hastily dictated every precaution that could diminish the danger to her and others. Velna had run risks that could not well be increased, and on her and on myself must devolve what remained to be done. I sent an ambâ to summon Davilo, gathered the garments that Eveena had thrown off, and removed them to the death-chamber. When the first arrangements were made, and I had paid the fee of Astona, the woman-physician, I passed out into the garden, and Davilo met me at the door of the peristyle. A few words explained all that was necessary. It was still almost dark; and as we stood close by the door, speaking in the low tone partly of sadness, partly of precaution, two figures were dimly discernible just inside, and we caught a few broken words.

“You have heard,” said a harsh voice, which seemed to be Astona’s, “there is no doubt now. You have your part to play, and can do it quickly and safely.”

I paid little attention to words whose dangerous significance would at another moment have been plain to me. But Davilo, greatly alarmed, laid his hand upon my arm. As he did so, another voice thrilled me with intensest pain and amazement.

“Be quick to bear your message,” Eivé said, in rapid guarded tones. “They have means of vengeance certain and prompt, and they never spare.”

Astona departed without seeing us. Eivé closed the door, and Davilo and I, hastily and unperceived, followed the spy to the gate of the enclosure. Some one waited for her there. What passed we could not hear; but, as we saw Astona and another depart, Davilo spoke imprudently aloud—

“She has the secret, and she must die. Nay (as I would have expostulated), she is spy, traitress, and assassin, and merits her doom most richly.”

“Hist!” said I, “your words may have fallen into other ears;” for I thought that beyond the wall I discerned a crouching figure. If that of a man, however, it was too far off, and dressed in colours too dark, to be clearly seen; and in another instant it had certainly vanished.

“Remember,” he urged, “you have heard that one quite as dangerous is under your own roof; and, once more, it is not only your life that is at stake. What you call courage, what seems to us sheer folly, may cost you and others what you value far more than your life. An error of softness now may make your future existence one long and useless remorse.”

Half-an-hour later, having warned the women to their rooms—ordering a variety of disinfecting measures in which Martial science excelled while they were needed there—I opened the door of the death chamber to those who carried in a coffer hollowed out of a dark, exceedingly dense natural stone, and half-filled with a liquid of enormous destructive power. Then I lifted tenderly the lifeless form, laid it on cushions arranged therein, kissed the lips, and closed the coffer. Two

of Davilo's attendants had meantime adjusted the electric machinery. We carried the coffer into the apartment where this worked to heat the stove, to keep the lights burning, to raise, warm, and diffuse the water through the house, and perform many other important household services. Two strong bars of conducting metal were attached to the apparatus, and fitted into two hollows of the coffer. A flash, a certain hissing sound, followed. After a few moments the coffer was opened, and Davilo, carefully gathering a few handfuls of solid white material, something resembling pumice stone in appearance, placed them in a golden chest about twelve inches cube, which was then soldered down by the heat derived from the electric power. Then all infected clothes and the contents of the death chamber were carried out for destruction; while, with a tool adjusted to the machinery, one of the attendants engraved a few characters upon the chest. Whatever the risk, I could not part with every relic of her we had lost; and, after passing them through such chemical purification as Martial science suggested, I took the three long chestnut locks I had preserved. Velna's quick fingers wove them into plaits, one of which I left with her, one bound around my own neck, and one reserved for Eveena. As soon as the sun had risen, I had despatched a message to the Prince, explaining the danger of infection to which I had been subjected, and asking permission notwithstanding to wait upon him. The emergency was so pressing that neither sorrow nor peril would allow me to neglect an embassy on which the lives of hundreds, and perhaps the safety of his kingdom, might depend. Passing Eivé as I turned towards Eveena's room, and fevered with intense thirst, I bade her bring me thither a cup of the carcarâ. I need not dwell on the terribly painful moments in which I bound round Eveena's arm a bracelet prized above all the choicest ornaments she possessed. To calm her agitation and my own by means of the charny, I sought the keys. They were not at my belt, and I asked, "Have I returned them to you?"

"Certainly not," said Eveena, startled. "Can you not find them?"

At this moment Eivé entered the room and presented me with the cup for which I had asked. It struck me with surprise, even at that moment, that Eveena took it from my hand and carried it first to her own lips. Eivé had turned to leave the room; but before she had reached the threshold Eveena had sprung up, placed her foot upon the spring that closed the door, and snatching the test-stone from my watch chain dipped it into the cup. Her face turned white as death, while she held up to my eyes the discoloured disc which proved the presence of the deadliest Martial poison.

"Be calm," she said, as a cry of horror burst from my lips. "The keys!"

"You have them," Eivé said with a gasp, her face still averted.

"I took them from Eveena myself," I answered sternly. "Stand back into that corner, Eivé," as I opened the door and called sharply the other members of the household. When they entered, unable to stand, I had fallen back upon a chair, and called Eivé to my side. As I laid my hand on her arm she threw herself on the floor, screaming and writhing like a terrified child rather than a woman detected in a crime, the conception and execution of which must have required an evil courage and determination happily seldom possessed by women.

"Stand up!" I said. "Lift her, then, Enva and Eiralé. Unfasten the shoulder-clasps and zone."

As her outer robe dropped, Eivé snatched at an object in its folds, but too late; and the electric keys, which gave access to all my cases, papers, and to the medicine-chest above all, lay glittering on the ground.

“That cup Eivé brought to me. Which of you saw her?”

“I did,” said Enva quietly, all feelings of malice and curiosity alike awed into silence by the evidence of some terrible, though as yet to them unknown, secret. “She mixed it and brought it hither herself.”

“And,” I said, “it contains a poison against which, had I drunk one-half the draught, no antidote could have availed—a poison to which these keys only could have given access.”

Again the test-stone was applied, and again the discoloration testified to the truth of the charge.

“You have seen?” I said.

“We have seen,” answered Enva, in the same tone of horror, too deep to be other than quiet.

We all left the room, closing the door upon the prisoner. Dismissing the girls to their own chambers, with strict injunctions not to quit them unpermitted, I was left alone with Eveena. We were silent for some minutes, my own heart oppressed with mingled emotions, all intensely painful, but so confused that, while conscious of acute suffering, I scarcely realised anything that had occurred. Eveena, who knelt beside me, though deeply horror-struck, was less surprised and was far less agitated than I. At last, leaning forward with her arms on my knee and looking up in my face, she was about to speak. But the touch and look seemed to break a spell, and, shuddering from head to foot, I burst into tears like those of an hysterical girl. When, with the strongest effort that shame and necessity could prompt, aided by her silent soothing, I had somewhat regained my self-command, Eveena spoke, in the same attitude and with the same look:—

“You said once that you could pardon such an attempt. That you should ever forgive at heart cannot be. That punishment should not follow so terrible a crime, even I cannot desire. But for my sake, do not give her up to the doom she has deserved. Do you know” (as I was silent) “what that doom is?”

“Death, I suppose.”

“Yes!” she said, shuddering, “but death with torture—death on the vivisection-table. Will you, whatever the danger—can you, give up to such a fate, to such hands, one whom your hand has caressed, whose head has rested on your heart?”

“It needs not that, Eveena,” I answered; “enough that she is woman. I would face that death myself rather than, for whatever crime, send a woman, above all a young girl, to such an end. I would rather by far slay my worst enemy with my own hand than consign him to a death of torture. But, more than that, my conscience would not permit me to call on the law to punish a

household treason, where household authority is so strong and so arbitrary as here. Assassination is the weapon of the oppressed and helpless; and it is not for me so to be judge in my own cause as to pronounce that Eivé has had no provocation.”

“Shame upon her!” said Eveena indignantly. “No one under your roof ever had or could have reason to raise a hand, I do not say against your life, but to give you a moment’s pain. I do not ask, I do not wish you to spare her; only I am glad to think you will deal with her yourself—remember she has herself removed all limit to your power—and not by the shameless and merciless hands to which the law would give her.”

We returned to Eveena’s chamber. The scene that followed I cannot bear to recall. Enough that Eivé knew as well as Eveena the law she had broken and the penalty she had incurred; and, petted darling as she had been, she utterly lacked all faith in the tenderness she had known so well, or even in the mercy to which Eveena had confidently appealed. Understanding at last that she was safe from the law, the expression of her gratitude was as vehement as her terror had been intense. But the new phase of passion was not the less repugnant. Not that there was anything strange in the violent revulsion of feeling. Born and trained among a race who fear to forgive, Eivé was familiar by report at least with the merciless vengeance of cowards. Whatever they might have done later, few would have promised mercy in the very moment of escape to an ordinary assassin; and if Eivé understood any aspect of my character, that she could best appreciate was the outraged tenderness which forbade me to look on hers as ordinary guilt. Acutely sensitive to pain and fear, she had both known the better to what terror might prompt the injured, and was the more appalled by the prospect. Her eagerness to accept by anticipation whatever degradation and pain domestic power could inflict, when released by the terrible alternative of legal prosecution from its usual limits, breathed more of doubt and terror than of shame or penitence. But at first it keenly affected me. It was with something akin to a bodily pang that I heard this fragile girl, so easily subdued by such rebuke or menace as her companions would scarcely have affected to fear, now pleading for punishment such as would have quelled the pride and courage of the most high-spirited of her sex. I felt the deepest pity, not so much for the fear with which she still trembled as for the agony of terror she must have previously endured. Eveena averted from her abject supplications a face in which I read much pain, but more of what would have been disgust in a less intensely sympathetic nature.

And ere long I saw or felt in Eivé’s manner that which caused me suddenly to dismiss Eveena from the room, as from a presence unfit for her spotless purity and exquisite delicacy. Finding in me no sign of passionate anger, no readiness, but reluctance to visit treason with physical pain, Eivé’s own expression changed. Unable to conceive the feeling that rendered the course she had at first expected simply impossible to me, a nature I had utterly misconceived caught at an idea few women, not experienced in the worst of life’s lessons, would have entertained. The tiny fragile form, the slight limbs whose delicate proportions seemed to me almost those of infancy, their irrepressible quivering plainly revealed by the absence of robe and veil, no man worthy of the name could have beheld without intense compassion. But such a feeling she could not realise. As her features lost the sincerity of overwhelming fear, as the drooping lids failed for one moment to conceal a look of almost assured exultation in the dark eyes, my soul was suddenly and thoroughly revolted. I had forgiven the hand aimed at a heart that never throbbed with a pulse unkind to her. I might have forgotten the treason that requited tenderness and trust by

seeking my life; but I could never forget, never recover, that moment's insight into thoughts that so outraged an affection which, if my conscience belied me not, was absolutely stainless and unselfish.

It cost a strong persistent effort of self-control to address her again. But a confession full and complete my duty to others compelled me to enforce. The story of the next hour I never told or can tell. To one only did I give a confidence that would have rendered explanation natural; and that one was the last to whom I could have spoken on this subject. Enough that the charming infantine simplicity had disguised an elaborate treachery of which I reluctantly learned that human nature is capable. The caressed and caressing child had sold my life, if not her own soul, for the promise of wealth that could purchase nothing I denied her, and of the first place among the women of her world. That promise I soon found had not been warranted, directly or indirectly, by him who alone could at present fulfil it. Needless to relate the details either of the confession or its extortion. Enough that Eivé learnt at last perforce that though I had, as it seemed to her, been fool enough to spare her the vengeance of the law, and to spare her still as far as possible, her power to fool me further was gone for ever. Needless to speak of the lies repeated and sustained, till truth was wrung from quivering lips and sobbing voice; of the looks that appealed long and incredulously to a love as utterly forfeited as misunderstood. To the last Eivé could not comprehend the nature that, having spared her so much, would not spare wholly; the mercy felt for the weakness, not for the charms of youth and sex. Shamed, grieved, wounded to the quick, I quitted the presence of one who, I fear, was as little worth the anguish I then endured for her, as the tenderness she had so long betrayed; and left the late darling of my house a prisoner under strict guard, necessary for the safety of others than ourselves.

Finding a message awaiting me, I sought at once the interview which the Sovereign fearlessly granted.

"I see," said the Prince with much feeling, as he received my salute, "that you have gone through deeper pain than such domestic losses can well cause to us. I am sorry that you are grieved. I can say no more, and perhaps the less I say the less pain I shall give. Only permit me this remark. Since I have known you, it has seemed to me that the utter distinction between our character and yours, showing as it does at so many points, springs from some single root-difference. We, so careful of our own life and comfort, care little for those of others. We, so afraid of pain, are indifferent to its infliction, unless we have to witness it, and only some of us flinch from the sight. The softness of heart you show in this trouble seems in some strange way associated with the strength of heart which you have proved in dangers, the least of which none of us would have encountered willingly, and which, forced on us, would have unnerved us all. I am glad to prove to you that to some extent I depart from my national character and approach, however, distantly, to yours. I can feel for a friend's sorrow, and I can face what you seem to consider a real danger. But you had a purpose in asking this audience. My ears are open—your lips are unsealed."

"Prince," I replied, "what you have said opens the way to that I wished to ask. You say truly that courage and tenderness have a common root, as have the unmanly softness and equally unmanly hardness common among your subjects. Those for whom death ends all utterly and for ever will of necessity, at least as soon as the training of years and of generations has rendered their thought consistent, dread death with intensest fear, and love to brighten and sweeten life with every

possible enjoyment. Animal enjoyment becomes the most precious, since it is the keenest. Higher pleasures lose half their value, when the distinction between the two is reduced to the distinction between the sensations of higher and lower nerve centres. Thus men care too much for themselves to care for others; and after all, strong deep affection, entwined with the heartstrings, can only torture and tear the hearts for which death is a final parting. Such love as I have felt for woman—even such love as I felt for her, your gift, whom I have lost—would be pain intolerable if the thought were ever present that one day we must, and any day we might, part for ever. I put the knife against my breast, my life in your hand, when I say this, and I ask of you no secrecy, no favour for myself; but that, as I trust you, you will guard the life that is dearest to me if you take from me the power to guard it.... There are those among your subjects who are not the cowards you find around your throne, who are not brutal in their households, not incapable of tenderness and sacrifice for others.”

As I spoke I carefully watched the Prince’s face, on which no shade of displeasure was visible; rather the sentiment of one who is somewhat gratified to hear a perplexing problem solved in a manner agreeable to his wishes.

“And the reason is,” I continued, “that these men and women believe or know that they are answerable to an eternal Sovereign mightier than yourself, and that they will reap, not perhaps here, but after death as they shall have sown; that if they do not forfeit the promise by their own deed, they shall rejoin hereafter those dearest to them here.”

“There are such?” he said. “I would they were known to me. I had not dreamed that there were in my realm men who would screen the heart of another with their own palm.”

“Prince,” I replied earnestly, “I as their ambassador as one of their leaders, appeal to you to know and to protect them. They can defend themselves at need, and, it may be, might prevail though matched one against a thousand. For their weapons are those against which no distance, no defences, no numbers afford protection. But in such a strife many of their lives must be lost, and infinite suffering and havoc wrought on foes they would willingly spare. They are threatened with extermination by secret spite or open force; but open force will be the last resort of enemies well aware that those who strike at the Star have ever been smitten by the lightning.”

A slight change in his countenance satisfied me that the Emblem was not unknown to him.

“You say,” he replied, “that there is an organised scheme to destroy these people by force or fraud?”

“The scheme, Prince, was confessed in my own hearing by one of its instruments; and in proof thereof, my own life, as a Chief of the Order, was attempted this morning.”

The Prince sprang to his feet in all the passion of a man who for the first time receives a personal insult; of an Autocrat stung to the quick by an unprecedented outrage to his authority and dignity.

“Who has dared?” he said. “Who has taken on himself to make law, or form plans for carrying

out old law, without my leave? Who has dared to strike at the life over which I have cast the shadow of my throne? Give me their names, my guest, and, before the evening mist closes in tomorrow, pronounce their doom.”

“I cannot obey your royal command. I have no proof against the only man who, to my knowledge, can desire my death. Those who actually and immediately aimed at my life are shielded by the inviolable weakness of sex from the revenge and even the justice of manhood.”

“Each man,” returned the Prince, but partially conceiving my meaning, “is master at home. I wish I were satisfied that your heart will let you deal justly and wisely with the most hateful offspring of the most hateful of living races—a woman who betrays the life of her lord. But those who planned a general scheme of destruction—a purpose of public policy—without my knowledge, must aim also at my life and throne; for even were their purpose such as I approved, attempted without my permission, they know I would never pardon the presumption. I do not sit in Council with dull ears, or silent lips, or empty hands; and it is not for the highest more than for the lowest under me to snatch my sceptre for a moment.”

“Guard then your own,” I said. “Without your leave and in your lifetime, open force will scarcely be used against us; and if against secret murder or outrage we appeal to the law, you will see that the law does justice?”

“I will,” he replied; “and I pardon your advice to guard my own, because you judge me by my people. But a Prince’s life is the charge of his guards; the lives of his people are his care.”

He was silent for a few minutes, evidently in deep reflection.

“I thank you,” he said at last, “and I give you one warning in partial return for yours. There is a law which can be used against the members of a secret society with terrible effect. Not only are they exposed to death if detected, but those who strike them are legally exempt from punishment. I will care that that law shall not menace you long. Whilst it remains guard yourselves; I am powerless to break it.”

As I quitted the Palace, Ergimo joined me and mounted my carriage.

Seizing a moment when none were within sight or hearing, he said—

“Astonia was found two hours ago dead, as an enemy or a traitor dies. She was seen to fall from the roof of her house, and none was near her when she fell. But Davilo has already been arrested as her murderer, on the ground that he was heard before sunrise this morning to say that she must die.”

“Who heard that must have heard more. Let this news be quickly known to whom it concerns.”

I checked the carriage instantly, and turned into a road that conducted us in ten minutes to a public telegraph office.

“Come with me,” I said, “quickly. As an officer of the Campât your presence may ensure the delivery of letters which might otherwise be stopped.”

He seized the hint at once, and as we approached a vacant desk he said to the nearest officer, “In the Campât’s name;” a form which ensured that the most audacious and curious spy, backed by the highest authority save that invoked, dared neither stop nor search into a message so warranted. Before I left the desk every Chief of the Zinta at his several post had received, through that strange symbolic language of which I have already given samples, from me advice of what had occurred and from Esmo warning to meet at an appointed place and time.

The day at whose close we should meet was that of Davilo’s trial. I mingled with the crowd around the Court doors, a crowd manifesting bitter hostility to the prisoner and to the Order, of whose secrets a revelation was eagerly expected. Easily forcing my way through the mass, I felt on a sudden a touch, a sign; and turning my eyes saw a face I had surely never looked on before. Yet the sign could only have been given by a colleague. That which followed implied the presence of the Signet itself.

“I told you,” whispered a voice I knew well, “how completely we can change even countenance at will.”

It was so; but though acquainted with the process, I had never believed that the change could be so absolute. By help of my strength and height, still more perhaps by the subtle influence of his own powerful will acting none the less imperiously on minds unconscious of its influence, Esmo made his way with me into the Court.

Around five sides of the hexagon were seats, tier above tier, appropriated to the public who wish to see as well as hear. The phonograph reported every word uttered to hundreds of distant offices. Against the sixth side were placed the seats of the seven judges; in front, at an equal elevation, the chair of the prisoner, the seats of the advocates on right and left, and the place from which each witness must deliver his testimony in full view and within easy hearing both of the bench, the bar, and the audience. Davilo sat in his chair unguarded, but in an attitude strangely constrained and motionless. Only his bright eyes moved freely, and his head turned a little from side to side. He recognised us instantly, and his look expressed no trace of fear.

“The quârre” whispered Esmo, observing my perplexity.

“It paralyses the nerves of motion, leaving those of sensation active; and is administered to a prisoner on the instant of his arrest, so as to keep him absolutely helpless till his sentence is executed, or till on his acquittal an antidote is administered.”

The counsel for the prosecution stated in the briefest possible words the story of Astona, from the moment when she left my house to that at which she was found dead, and the method of her death; related Davilo’s words, and then proceeded to call his witnesses. Of course the one vital question was whether by possibility Davilo, who had never left my premises since the words were uttered, could have brought about a death, evidently accidental in its immediate cause, at a distance of many miles. His words were attested by one whom I recognised as an officer of Endo

Zamptâ, and I was called to confirm or contradict them. The presiding judge, as I took my place, read a brief telling terrible menace, expounding the legal penalties of perjury.

“You will speak the truth,” he said, “or you know the consequences.”

As he spoke, he encountered Esmo’s eyes, and quailed under the gaze, sinking back into his seat motionless as the bird under the alleged fascination of the serpent. I admitted that the words in question had been addressed to me; and I proved that Davilo had been busily engaged with me from that moment until an hour later than that of the fatal accident. There being thus no dispute as to the facts, a keen contest of argument proceeded between the advocates on either side. The defenders of the prisoner ridiculed with an affectation of scientific contempt—none the less effective because the chief pleader was himself an experienced member of our Order—the idea that the actions or fate of a person at a distance could be affected by the mere will of another; and related, as absurd and incredible traditions of old to this purport, some anecdotes which had been communicated to me as among the best attested and most striking examples of the historical exercise of the mystic powers. The able and bigoted sceptics, who prosecuted this day in the interests of science, insisted, with equal inconsistency and equal skill, on the innumerable recorded and attested instances of some diabolical power possessed by certain supposed members of a detested and malignant sect. A year ago the judges would probably have sided unanimously with the former. But the feeling that animated the conspiracy, if it should be so called, against the Zinta, had penetrated all Martial society; and in order to destroy the votaries of religion, Science, in the persons of her most distinguished students, was this day ready to abjure her character, and forswear her most cherished tenets. As has often happened in Mars, and may one day happen on Earth as the new ideas come into greater force, proven fact was deliberately set against logical impossibility; and for once—what probably had not happened in Mars for ten thousand years—proven fact and common sense carried the day against science and “universal experience;” but, unhappily, against the prisoner. After retiring separately for about an hour, the Judges returned. Their brief and very confused decisions were read by the Secretary. The reasons were seldom intelligible, each contradicting himself and all his colleagues, and not one among the judgments having even the appearance of cohesion and consistency. But, by six to one, they doomed the prisoner to the vivisection-table. As he was carried forth his eyes met ours, and the perfect calm and steadiness of their glance astounded me not a little.

My natural thought prompted, of course, an appeal to the mercy of the Throne. In every State a power of giving effect in the law’s despite to public policy, or of commanding that, in certain strange and unforeseen circumstances, common sense and practical justice shall override a sentence which no court bound by the letter of the law can withhold, must rest with the Sovereign. But in Mars the prerogative of mercy, in the proper sense of the word—judicial rather than political mercy—is exercised less by the Prince himself than by a small council of judges advising him and pronouncing their decision in his name. Even if we could have relied on the Campât with absolute confidence, there were many reasons against an appeal which would, in fact, have asked him to declare himself on our side. While such a declaration might, in the existing state of public feeling, have caused revolt or riot, it would have put on their guard, perhaps driven to a premature attempt which he was not prepared to meet, the traitors whose scheme against his life the Prince felt confident that he should speedily detect and punish.

All these considerations were brought before our Council, whose debate was brief but not hurried or excited. The supreme calm of Esmo's demeanour communicated itself to all the eleven, in not one of whom could I recognise till they spoke my colleagues of our last Council. The order went forth that a party should attend Esmo's orders at a point about half a mile distant from the studio in which, for the benefit of a great medical school, my unhappy friend was to be put to torture indescribable.

"Happily," said Esmo, "the first portion of the experiment will be made by the Vivisector-General alone, and will commence at midnight. Half an hour before that time our party will be assembled."

I had insisted on being one of the band, and Esmo had very reluctantly yielded to the unanimous approval of colleagues who thought that on this occasion physical strength might render essential service at some unforeseen crisis. Moreover, the place lying within my geographical province, several of those engaged looked up to me as their immediate chief, and it was thought well to place me on such an occasion at their head.

The night was, as had been predicted, absolutely dark, but the roads were brilliantly lighted. Suddenly, however, as we drew towards the point of meeting, the lights went out, an accident unprecedented in Martial administration.

"But they will be relighted!" said one of my companions.

"Can human skill relight the lamps that the power of the Star has extinguished?" was the reply of another.

We fell in military order, with perfect discipline and steadiness, under the influence of Esmo's silent will and scarcely discernible gestures. The wing of the college in which the dissection was to take place was guarded by some forty sentinels, armed with the spear and lightning gun. But as we came close to them, I observed that each stood motionless as a statue, with eyes open, but utterly devoid of sight.

"I have been here before you," murmured Esmo. "To the left."

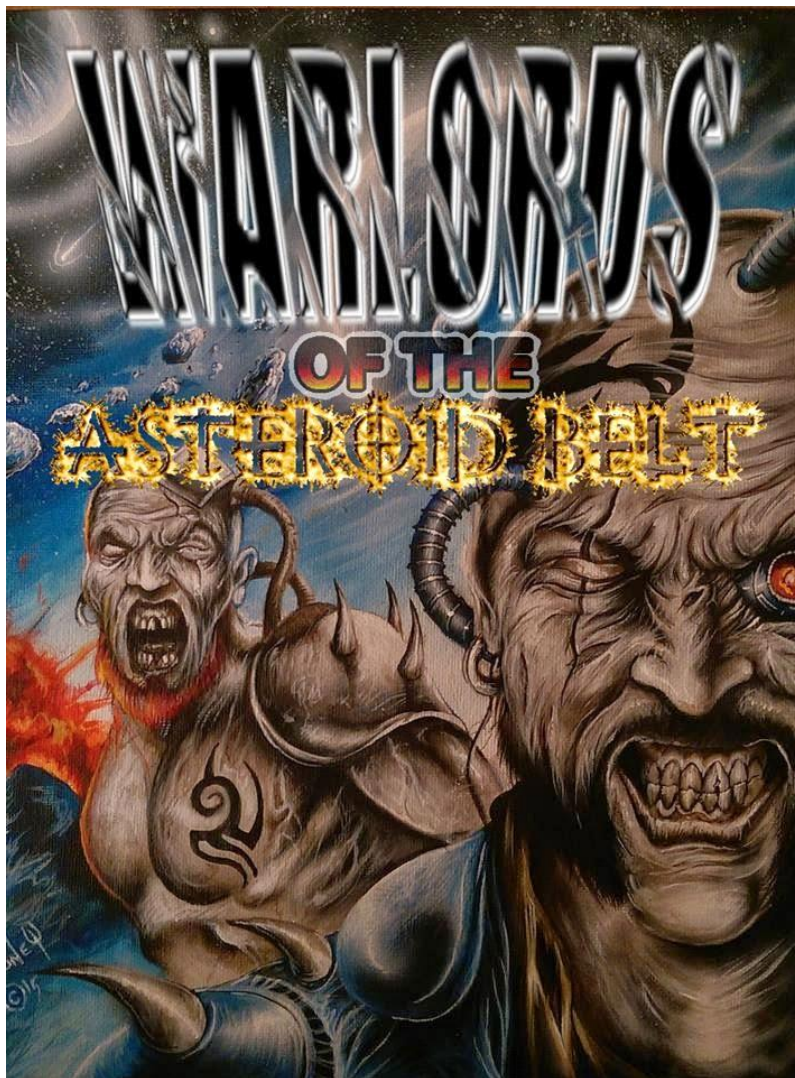
The door gave way at once before the touch of some electric instrument or immaterial power wielded by his hand. We passed in, guided by him, through one or two chambers, and along a passage, at the end of which a light shone through a crystal door. Here proof of Esmo's superior judgment was afforded. He would fain have had the party much smaller than it was, and composed exclusively of the very few old and experienced members of the Zinta within reach at the moment. We were nearly a score in number, some even more inexperienced than myself, half the party my own immediate followers; and I remembered far better the feelings of a friend and a soldier than the lessons of the college or the Shrine. As the door opened, and we caught sight of our friend stretched on the vivisection table, the younger of the company, hurried on by my own example, lost their heads and got, so to speak, out of hand. We rushed tumultuously forward and fell on the Vivisector and two assistants, who stood motionless and perhaps unconscious, but with glittering knives just ready for their fiendish work. Before Esmo could interpose, these

executioners were cut down with the “crimson blade” (cold steel); and we bore off our friend with more of eagerness and triumph than at all befitted our own consciousness of power, or suited the temper of our Chief.

Never did Esmo speak so sharply or severely as in the brief reprimand he gave us when we reassembled; the justice of which. I instinctively acknowledged, as he ceased, by the salute I had given so often at the close of less impressive and less richly deserved reprimands on the parade ground or the march. Uninjured, and speedily relieved from the effects of the quârry, Davilo was carried off to a place of temporary concealment, and we dispersed.

Eveena heard my story with more annoyance than interest, mortified not a little by the reproof I had drawn upon myself and my followers; and, despite her reluctance to seem to acknowledge a fault in me, apparently afraid that a similar ebullition of feeling might on some future occasion lead to serious disaster.

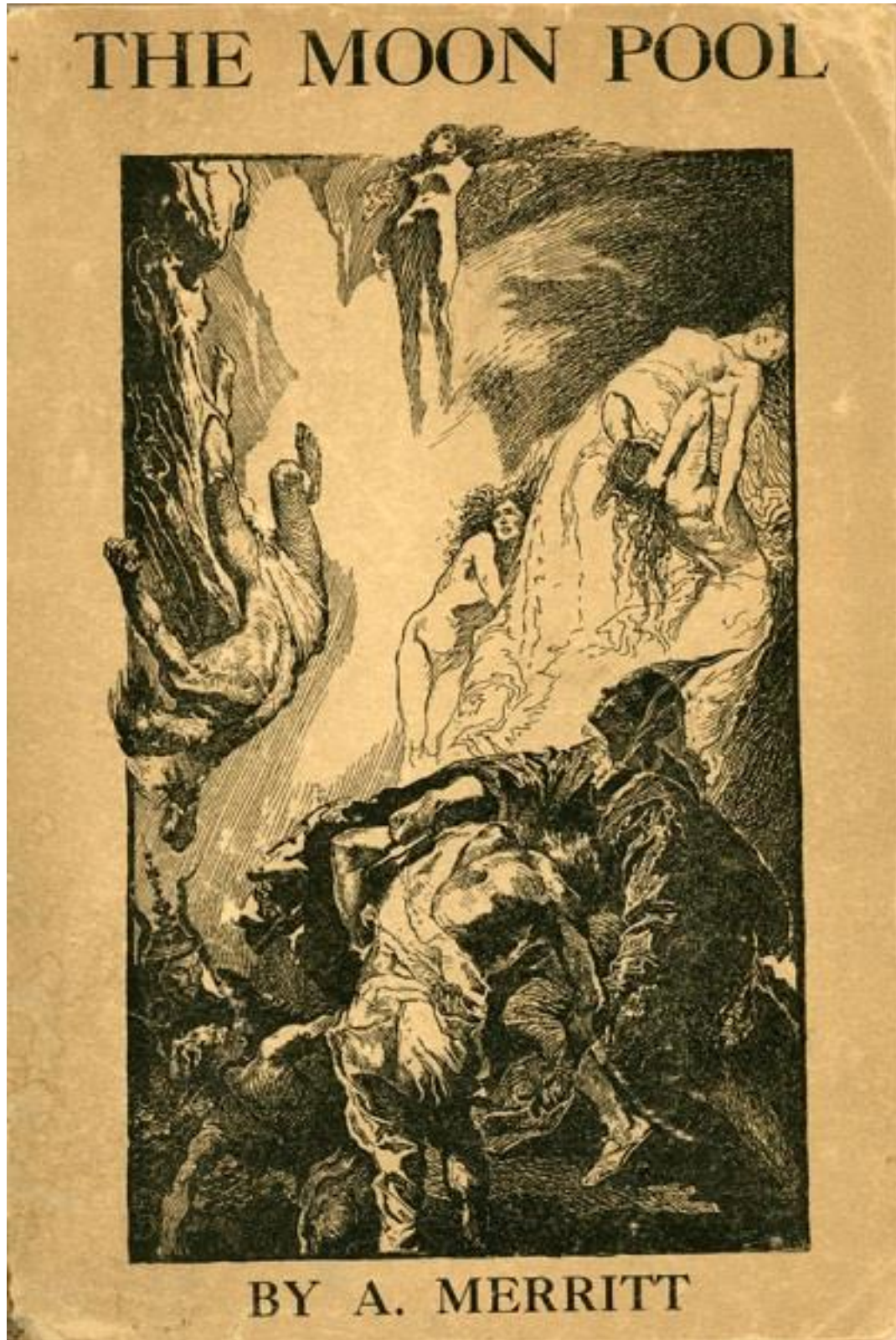
CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE



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[Return to Contents](#)

THE MOON POOL by A Merritt



Chapter I: The Thing on the Moon Path

For two months I had been on the d'Entrecasteaux Islands gathering data for the concluding chapters of my book upon the flora of the volcanic islands of the South Pacific. The day before I had reached Port Moresby and had seen my specimens safely stored on board the Southern Queen. As I sat on the upper deck I thought, with homesick mind, of the long leagues between me and Melbourne, and the longer ones between Melbourne and New York.

It was one of Papua's yellow mornings when she shows herself in her sombrest, most baleful mood. The sky was smouldering ochre. Over the island brooded a spirit sullen, alien, implacable, filled with the threat of latent, malefic forces waiting to be unleashed. It seemed an emanation out of the untamed, sinister heart of Papua herself—sinister even when she smiles. And now and then, on the wind, came a breath from virgin jungles, laden with unfamiliar odours, mysterious and menacing.

It is on such mornings that Papua whispers to you of her immemorial ancientness and of her power. And, as every white man must, I fought against her spell. While I struggled I saw a tall figure striding down the pier; a Kapa-Kapa boy followed swinging a new valise. There was something familiar about the tall man. As he reached the gangplank he looked up straight into my eyes, stared for a moment, then waved his hand.

And now I knew him. It was Dr. David Throckmartin—"Throck" he was to me always, one of my oldest friends and, as well, a mind of the first water whose power and achievements were for me a constant inspiration as they were, I know, for scores other.

Coincidentally with my recognition came a shock of surprise, definitely—unpleasant. It was Throckmartin—but about him was something disturbingly unlike the man I had known long so well and to whom and to whose little party I had bidden farewell less than a month before I myself had sailed for these seas. He had married only a few weeks before, Edith, the daughter of Professor William Frazier, younger by at least a decade than he but at one with him in his ideals and as much in love, if it were possible, as Throckmartin. By virtue of her father's training a wonderful assistant, by virtue of her own sweet, sound heart a—I use the word in its olden sense—lover. With his equally youthful associate Dr. Charles Stanton and a Swedish woman, Thora Halversen, who had been Edith Throckmartin's nurse from babyhood, they had set forth for the Nan-Matal, that extraordinary group of island ruins clustered along the eastern shore of Ponape in the Carolines.

I knew that he had planned to spend at least a year among these ruins, not only of Ponape but of Lele—twin centres of a colossal riddle of humanity, a weird flower of civilization that blossomed ages before the seeds of Egypt were sown; of whose arts we know little enough and of whose science nothing. He had carried with him unusually complete equipment for the work he had expected to do and which, he hoped, would be his monument.

What then had brought Throckmartin to Port Moresby, and what was that change I had sensed in him?

Hurrying down to the lower deck I found him with the purser. As I spoke he turned, thrust out to me an eager hand—and then I saw what was that difference that had so moved me. He knew, of course by my silence and involuntary shrinking the shock my closer look had given me. His eyes filled; he turned brusquely from the purser, hesitated—then hurried off to his stateroom.

“‘E looks rather queer—eh?” said the purser. “Know ‘im well, sir? Seems to ‘ave given you quite a start.”

I made some reply and went slowly up to my chair. There I sat, composed my mind and tried to define what it was that had shaken me so. Now it came to me. The old Throckmartin was on the eve of his venture just turned forty, lithe, erect, muscular; his controlling expression one of enthusiasm, of intellectual keenness, of—what shall I say—expectant search. His always questioning brain had stamped its vigour upon his face.

But the Throckmartin I had seen below was one who had borne some scaring shock of mingled rapture and horror; some soul cataclysm that in its climax had remoulded, deep from within, his face, setting on it seal of wedded ecstasy and despair; as though indeed these two had come to him hand in hand, taken possession of him and departing left behind, ineradicably, their linked shadows!

Yes—it was that which appalled. For how could rapture and horror, Heaven and Hell mix, clasp hands—kiss?

Yet these were what in closest embrace lay on Throckmartin’s face!

Deep in thought, subconsciously with relief, I watched the shore line sink behind; welcomed the touch of the wind of the free seas. I had hoped, and within the hope was an inexplicable shrinking that I would meet Throckmartin at lunch. He did not come down, and I was sensible of deliverance within my disappointment. All that afternoon I lounged about uneasily but still he kept to his cabin—and within me was no strength to summon him. Nor did he appear at dinner.

Dusk and night fell swiftly. I was warm and went back to my deck-chair. The Southern Queen was rolling to a disquieting swell and I had the place to myself.

Over the heavens was a canopy of cloud, glowing faintly and testifying to the moon riding behind it. There was much phosphorescence. Fitfully before the ship and at her sides arose those stranger little swirls of mist that swirl up from the Southern Ocean like breath of sea monsters, whirl for an instant and disappear.

Suddenly the deck door opened and through it came Throckmartin. He paused uncertainly, looked up at the sky with a curiously eager, intent gaze, hesitated, then closed the door behind him.

“Throck,” I called. “Come! It’s Goodwin.”

He made his way to me.

“Throck,” I said, wasting no time in preliminaries. “What’s wrong? Can I help you?”

I felt his body grow tense.

“I’m going to Melbourne, Goodwin,” he answered. “I need a few things—need them urgently. And more men—white men—”

He stopped abruptly; rose from his chair, gazed intently toward the north. I followed his gaze. Far, far away the moon had broken through the clouds. Almost on the horizon, you could see the faint luminescence of it upon the smooth sea. The distant patch of light quivered and shook. The clouds thickened again and it was gone. The ship raced on southward, swiftly.

Throckmartin dropped into his chair. He lighted a cigarette with a hand that trembled; then turned to me with abrupt resolution.

“Goodwin,” he said. “I do need help. If ever man needed it, I do. Goodwin—can you imagine yourself in another world, alien, unfamiliar, a world of terror, whose unknown joy is its greatest terror of all; you all alone there, a stranger! As such a man would need help, so I need—”

He paused abruptly and arose; the cigarette dropped from his fingers. The moon had again broken through the clouds, and this time much nearer. Not a mile away was the patch of light that it threw upon the waves. Back of it, to the rim of the sea was a lane of moonlight; a gigantic gleaming serpent racing over the edge of the world straight and surely toward the ship.

Throckmartin stiffened to it as a pointer does to a hidden covey. To me from him pulsed a thrill of horror—but horror tinged with an unfamiliar, an infernal joy. It came to me and passed away—leaving me trembling with its shock of bitter sweet.

He bent forward, all his soul in his eyes. The moon path swept closer, closer still. It was now less than half a mile away. From it the ship fled—almost as though pursued. Down upon it, swift and straight, a radiant torrent cleaving the waves, raced the moon stream.

“Good God!” breathed Throckmartin, and if ever the words were a prayer and an invocation they were.

And then, for the first time—I saw—it!

The moon path stretched to the horizon and was bordered by darkness. It was as though the clouds above had been parted to form a lane-drawn aside like curtains or as the waters of the Red Sea were held back to let the hosts of Israel through. On each side of the stream was the black shadow cast by the folds of the high canopies. And straight as a road between the opaque walls gleamed, shimmered, and danced the shining, racing, rapids of the moonlight.

Far, it seemed immeasurably far, along this stream of silver fire I sensed, rather than saw, something coming. It drew first into sight as a deeper glow within the light. On and on it swept

toward us—an opalescent mistiness that sped with the suggestion of some winged creature in arrowed flight. Dimly there crept into my mind memory of the Dyak legend of the winged messenger of Buddha—the Akla bird whose feathers are woven of the moon rays, whose heart is a living opal, whose wings in flight echo the crystal clear music of the white stars—but whose beak is of frozen flame and shreds the souls of unbelievers.

Closer it drew and now there came to me sweet, insistent tinklings—like pizzicati on violins of glass; crystal clear; diamonds melting into sounds!

Now the Thing was close to the end of the white path; close up to the barrier of darkness still between the ship and the sparkling head of the moon stream. Now it beat up against that barrier as a bird against the bars of its cage. It whirled with shimmering plumes, with swirls of lacy light, with spirals of living vapour. It held within it odd, unfamiliar gleams as of shifting mother-of-pearl. Coruscations and glittering atoms drifted through it as though it drew them from the rays that bathed it.

Nearer and nearer it came, borne on the sparkling waves, and ever thinner shrank the protecting wall of shadow between it and us. Within the mistiness was a core, a nucleus of intenser light—veined, opaline, effulgent, intensely alive. And above it, tangled in the plumes and spirals that throbbed and whirled were seven glowing lights.

Through all the incessant but strangely ordered movement of the—thing—these lights held firm and steady. They were seven—like seven little moons. One was of a pearly pink, one of a delicate nacreous blue, one of lambent saffron, one of the emerald you see in the shallow waters of tropic isles; a deathly white; a ghostly amethyst; and one of the silver that is seen only when the flying fish leap beneath the moon.

The tinkling music was louder still. It pierced the ears with a shower of tiny lances; it made the heart beat jubilantly—and checked it dolorously. It closed the throat with a throb of rapture and gripped it tight with the hand of infinite sorrow!

Came to me now a murmuring cry, stilling the crystal notes. It was articulate—but as though from something utterly foreign to this world. The ear took the cry and translated with conscious labour into the sounds of earth. And even as it compassed, the brain shrank from it irresistibly, and simultaneously it seemed reached toward it with irresistible eagerness.

Throckmartin strode toward the front of the deck, straight toward the vision, now but a few yards away from the stern. His face had lost all human semblance. Utter agony and utter ecstasy—there they were side by side, not resisting each other; unholy inhuman companions blending into a look that none of God's creatures should wear—and deep, deep as his soul! A devil and a God dwelling harmoniously side by side! So must Satan, newly fallen, still divine, seeing heaven and contemplating hell, have appeared.

And then—swiftly the moon path faded! The clouds swept over the sky as though a hand had drawn them together. Up from the south came a roaring squall. As the moon vanished what I had seen vanished with it—blotted out as an image on a magic lantern; the tinkling ceased abruptly—

leaving a silence like that which follows an abrupt thunder clap. There was nothing about us but silence and blackness!

Through me passed a trembling as one who has stood on the very verge of the gulf wherein the men of the Louisiades says lurks the fisher of the souls of men, and has been plucked back by sheerest chance.

Throckmartin passed an arm around me.

“It is as I thought,” he said. In his voice was a new note; the calm certainty that has swept aside a waiting terror of the unknown. “Now I know! Come with me to my cabin, old friend. For now that you too have seen I can tell you”—he hesitated—“what it was you saw,” he ended.

As we passed through the door we met the ship’s first officer. Throckmartin composed his face into at least a semblance of normality.

“Going to have much of a storm?” he asked.

“Yes,” said the mate. “Probably all the way to Melbourne.”

Throckmartin straightened as though with a new thought. He gripped the officer’s sleeve eagerly.

“You mean at least cloudy weather—for”—he hesitated—“for the next three nights, say?”

“And for three more,” replied the mate.

“Thank God!” cried Throckmartin, and I think I never heard such relief and hope as was in his voice.

The sailor stood amazed. “Thank God?” he repeated. “Thank—what d’ye mean?”

But Throckmartin was moving onward to his cabin. I started to follow. The first officer stopped me.

“Your friend,” he said, “is he ill?”

“The sea!” I answered hurriedly. “He’s not used to it. I am going to look after him.”

Doubt and disbelief were plain in the seaman’s eyes but I hurried on. For I knew now that Throckmartin was ill indeed—but with a sickness the ship’s doctor nor any other could heal.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)